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CHAPTER I

THE room looked very cool in the afternoon light. A few bowls of white roses that were arranged about it seemed to lend it an aspect of more than usual specklessness.

To Madame Querterot, a person of no taste, who made no pretension of being fastidious, and who had, moreover, little sympathy with a passion for cleanliness when this was carried to exaggeration, the airy lightness of the place suggested the convent school of her youthful days; and, bringing again before her the figure of a stern sister superior who had been accustomed in those vanished times to deal out severe penalties to the youthful but constantly erring Justine, caused her invariably to enter Mrs. Vanderstein's bedroom after a quick intake of the breath on the threshold, as if she were about to plunge into an icy bath.

Mrs. Vanderstein, ever the essence of punctuality, was ready for her on this particular evening, as she always was.

Wrapped in some diaphanous white garment, which she would perhaps have called a dressing-gown, she lay on a silk covered sofa and lazily watched Madame Querterot unpacking the little bag in which she carried the accessories of her profession, that of a hairdresser and beauty specialist.

"You must make me very beautiful to-night, Madame Justine," she said, with a smile. "We are going to hear *La Bohème*, and the Queen will be there. My box is nearly opposite the Royal box, and in case Her Majesty's eyes fall in my direction I wish to look my best."

"All eyes will not fail to be directed to your side of the theatre, madame," replied Madame Querterot, taking out her collection of pomade pots, powder boxes and washes, and arranging them in a semicircle upon a Louis XVI table. "Royalties know the use of opera glasses as well as any citizen. As for making you beautiful, the good God has occupied Himself with that! I can only preserve what I find. I can make your beauty endure, madame. More than that one must not ask of me. I am not the good God, me!" and Madame Querterot's plump shoulders shook with easy merriment.

Mrs. Vanderstein, too, smiled. She did not suffer from any affectation of modesty as far as her obvious good looks were concerned. But she was obliged to own regretfully—though only to herself—that she was no longer as young as she had been; and the masseuse's assurances that her youthful appearance could be indefinitely preserved fell on her ears as melodiously as if they were indeed a prelude to the magic strains that would presently rise to charm her through the envied, if stuffy atmosphere of Covent Garden.

"You are a flatterer, Madame Justine," she murmured. Then, before she laid her head back against the cushions and gave herself up to Madame Querterot's ministrations, she called to a figure that was seated in the window, half hidden among the muslin curtains that fluttered before it: "Barbara, be sure and tell me if you see anything interesting."

Barbara Turner answered without looking round:

"Nothing has come yet, but I am keeping a good look-out."

Mrs. Vanderstein closed her eyes, and Madame Querterot, after turning up her sleeves and arraying herself in an apron, began to pass her short fingers over the placid features and smooth skin of the lady's face. For a time nothing else stirred in the big room.

A ray of sunlight passed very slowly across a portion of the grey panelled walls, and coming to a gilded mirror climbed cautiously over the carved frame, only to be caught and held a while on the flashing surface of the looking-glass.

On every side the subdued gold of ancient frames, surrounding priceless pictures that had been acquired by the help of the excellent judgment and long purse of the late Mr. Vanderstein, shone softly and pleasantly.

The furniture, of the best period of the reign of Louis XVI—as was the case all over the house—had been collected by the same unerring connoisseur, and each piece would have been welcomed with tears of joy by many an eager director of museums.

The thick carpet that covered the floor exactly matched the pale grey tone of the walls and upholstery, and the extreme lightness of these imparted that air of great luxury which the lavish use of fragile colours, in a town as dirty as London, does more to convey than any more ostentatious sign of extravagance.

Through the open casements many noises rose from the street, for the bedroom was at the front of the house, which stood in a street in Mayfair immediately opposite to a great hotel where the overflow of foreign Royalty is frequently sheltered at times of Court festivals, when the hospitable walls of the Palace are filled to bursting point.

The coming and going of these distinguished guests

was always a source of the most unquenchable interest to Mrs. Vanderstein, to whom every trivial action, if it were performed by any sort of a Highness, was brimming with thrilling suggestion.

At the period of which I speak, London was astir with preparations for a great function, and representatives of the Courts of Europe were arriving by every train from the Continent.

Mrs. Vanderstein could hear the sounds of a constant stream of carriages and motors stopping or starting below her window, and knew that it was not to her door that they crowded, but across the road under the magnificent stucco portico of Fianti's Hotel.

"Barbara, has no one interesting appeared?" she called again after a few minutes.

"Not yet," was the reply. "There's a victoria driving along the street now, though, which looks something like a Royal turnout. Rather a nice looking pair in it."

"Is it a pair of foreign looking gentlemen?" asked Mrs. Vanderstein excitedly.

"No, a pair of Cleveland bays. I hate them as a rule, but from here they don't look bad. All back, though, of course."

"My dear girl, do tell me about the people. I don't want to hear about your horrid horses. I believe all sorts of celebrities go in and out of Fianti's while I am lying here, and you never even notice them."

"Yes, yes, I do," said Barbara. "I will call you directly any one passes who looks as if he might be accustomed to wield the sceptre, or who is wearing a crown over his top hat."

Mrs. Vanderstein made a little impatient movement. It annoyed her that her companion did not take her duties more seriously—did not, in fact, seem to understand how much more important was this task of

keeping a good look-out in the wide bow of the window than any of the others that she was apt to approach in a quite admirable spirit of thoroughness. Why, wondered Mrs. Vanderstein, could the girl not do as she was asked in this matter, without making those attempts to be facetious which appeared so ill-advised, and which fell so extremely flat, as a moment's observation would have made apparent to her? She did not make jokes about the flowers while she arranged them, nor about Mrs. Vanderstein's correspondence, to which it was her business to attend. She was able to answer the telephone or order the carriage without indulging in unseemly giggles. Why then, in heaven's name, couldn't she take up her post of observation at the window without finding in it an excuse for pleasantries as dull as they were pointless?

Mrs. Vanderstein sighed deeply and wriggled her head deeper in the cushions.

Madame Querterot saw the cloud and guessed very easily what had caused it: she had often noticed similar disturbances of her customer's otherwise easy-going temper. Knowing with remarkable accuracy on which side of her bread the butter was applied, she at once set herself to calm the troubled waters.

"You did not see me to-day, madame," she began, "but me, I have already seen you. I passed in Piccadilly where your auto was stopped in a block before the Ritz."

"Yes, we were kept there quite a long time, but I did not see you, Madame Justine," said Mrs. Vanderstein indifferently.

"How should you have seen me? I was in a bus. It's not there that you would look for your acquaintances. That understands itself! But I was not the only one to see you, and what I heard said of you then will make you smile. I said to myself at the moment,

'It is quite natural, Justine, but it will make her laugh all the same.' "

"What was it? Who can have said anything of me in an omnibus?"

"Ah, madame! Even in buses people do not cease to talk. One hears things to make one twist with laughter! But one hears the truth too, sometimes, and this young man, even if he made a mistake, one cannot surprise oneself at that!"

"But you do not tell me what you heard," cried Mrs. Vanderstein.

"It was this young man of whom I speak to you. He was a nice smart looking young gentleman, and he had with him a lady, well dressed and very chic. What they did in that *galère* I know not, but as we passed the Ritz he touched his companion on the arm and pointed out of the window. 'Look, Alice,' said he, 'you see the dark lady in that motor? It is the Russian Princess they talk so much about, Princess Sonia. Is she not handsome? She was pointed out to me last night at the Foreign Office reception.' The lady he called Alice looked where he pointed and every one in the bus looked also. I, too, turned round and followed the eyes of the others. And who did I see, madame? Can you not guess? It was at you they looked, as you sat there in your beautiful car with Mademoiselle Turner beside you. You, with your flowers and your pretty hat with the long white feather, and your wonderful pearls. And your face, madame! But I must not permit myself to speak of that!"

"You talk great nonsense, and I do not believe a word you say," said Mrs. Vanderstein gaily, her good-humour more than restored. "No one could mistake me for a moment for the beautiful Princess Sonia."

"Nevertheless, madame, it happened as I say. And I see nothing strange about it. It was a very natural

mistake, as anyone who has seen both you and the Princess will readily agree."

Madame Querterot had not seen the Princess herself, but she had studied her photograph in the illustrated papers and devoutly hoped that Mrs. Vanderstein had not herself met the lady at closer quarters.

"The poor young man was not near enough to observe my wrinkles and my double chin, Madame Justine!"

"Bah! You will have forgotten the word wrinkle, which is not *d'ailleurs* a pretty one, by the time I have finished giving you my course of treatment. And as for a double chin, look at me, madame! I assure you that, in my time, I have developed no less than five double chins. And I have rubbed them all away. Do you suppose, then, that I shall allow you to have one?"

Mrs. Vanderstein looked as she was bidden. Indeed she lost no opportunity of studying the countenance of the little Frenchwoman, who, on her own admission, was at least ten years older than herself, but whose face was as smooth and unlined as that of a girl, though there was an indefinable something in the expression, an experienced glimmer, perhaps, in the eyes, that prevented her appearance from being entirely youthful.

Still, she might very well have been taken for Mrs. Vanderstein's junior, even for her younger sister, possibly, if she had been as well dressed, for there was a certain resemblance between the two women. Both were short and plump, both had long oval faces and brown eyes set rather near together beneath arched, well-marked eyebrows, and, though Madame Querterot had not a drop of Jewish blood in her veins and her nose did not assume the Hebraic droop that in Mrs. Vanderstein betrayed her race, yet it was distinctly of the hooked variety and gave her a family likeness to

the children of Israel, on which fact her relations and friends had frequently considered it entertaining to dwell. Her hair, however, was golden and fluffy, curling about her head with a juvenile abandon ; while Mrs. Vanderstein's dark, straight locks were simply and severely dressed at the back, and concealed on her forehead by a large, flat curled fringe in the manner affected by the English Royal ladies.

Mrs. Vanderstein at all events was sincere in her admirations.

" If you can make me look as young as you do," she said now, " I ask nothing better. But indeed London in this hot weather is very wearing, and I see myself grow older every morning. To-day it was oppressive to drive even in an open motor."

To drive? Ah ! Madame Querterot was not imaginative, but a vision of the crowded bus in which she went about her business floated before her, side by side with one of a rushing motor car ; and she paused in her work for a minute and looked around her.

An electric fan revolved tirelessly above the window, and on a table at the foot of the bed was placed a large block of ice, half hidden in flowers and ferns. She raised herself, inhaling the cool air in long, deep breaths.

" It has been hot, very hot, these last days," she admitted. " It reminds me of our beautiful Paris, and of much in my young days that I would be content to forget," she added, with a laugh. " Ah, the room in that city, in which as a girl I used to work ; the little dark room where I learnt my trade ! It was hot in that room in the summer. But, madame, I could not tell you how hot it was. I remember one of the girls who used to pray quite seriously to die, because, she explained to us, wherever she went in another world it could not fail to be more cool. It was over a baker's

kitchen and had no window except one which gave on to a sort of shaft that ran up the middle of the house, so that we had the gas always burning. Oh, la, la!"

"How dreadful!" murmured Mrs. Vanderstein comfortably. "I wonder it was allowed."

"Allowed? Ah, madame, there are plenty of worse workrooms than that in Paris. I wonder what you would say if you could see your dresses made! We liked it very well in the winter, for there were no stairs, and it was agreeable then to shut the window and profit by the warmth from the kitchen. That was all long ago, before I married that poor Eugène and came to live in London. They were, all the same, not so bad, those days. Ah, la jeunesse, la belle jeunesse, which one does not know how to enjoy when one has it."

Madame Querterot crossed over to the table and laid her hands on the block of ice, casting a glance over her shoulder to the window where Barbara sat at her sentry post. The motionless, silent figure annoyed Madame Querterot. To be conscious that all her chatter was overheard by that quiet listener got on her nerves and sometimes made her, as she said, feel as if her own words would suffocate her. There was so much she could have said to Mrs. Vanderstein from time to time if they had been alone—much that she instinctively felt would have been very acceptable to that lady—but in the presence of Miss Turner, even though nothing of her were visible except the back of her head, there were, it appeared, lengths of flattery to which Madame Querterot found herself incapable of proceeding. Thus did a feeling of awkwardness, some sense of restraint, cast a certain gloom over hours that should have been the brightest in the day.

"These roses, madame, how fine they are," she murmured, bending towards a bowl that stood on the table, and unconsciously her voice took on a note of

defiance as she faced the window. "They are as beautiful as if they were artificial. One would say they were made of silk!"

Mrs. Vanderstein laughed tolerantly, but Barbara, her face turned to the street, made a naughty face.

Madame Querterot, with hands ice cool, went back to her massage, and for a little while again no one spoke.

Suddenly Barbara turned.

"Here comes a Royal carriage," she said. "I think it is Prince Felipe of Targona and his mother."

"Oh I must see them," cried Mrs. Vanderstein, jumping up, and brushing Madame Querterot unceremoniously aside. "Where are they?" She ran to the window.

The masseuse followed more slowly, and three heads were thrust out over the street.

CHAPTER II

A CARRIAGE was driving up to the steps of Fianti's.

To allow it to approach, a waiting motor was obliged to move away, and in the short interval that elapsed while this was being wound up and started off the carriage paused almost immediately opposite the window of Mrs. Vanderstein's bedroom; she had thus a better view of its occupants than it had ever previously been her fortune to obtain.

On the right of the barouche sat an elderly lady, with grey hair piled high under a very small black hat. She sat very upright and stiff, giving a little nervous start when the horses moved forward impatiently and were drawn up with a jerk by the coachman.

"That is the Princess," said Barbara, whose head was touching Mrs. Vanderstein's.

Prince Felipe sat beside his mother, a middle-aged young man of forty with a black upturned moustache and an eyeglass. He had a cigarette in his hand and, as they looked, he turned round and gazed after a smartly dressed woman who was driving by.

On the back seat of the carriage sat two other men—gentlemen in waiting, no doubt.

Mrs. Vanderstein's eyes were, however, fully occupied with the Princess and her son.

"Isn't he handsome?" she whispered to Barbara, as if there were a danger of being overheard above the rattle and din of the busy roadway.

But it almost seemed as if the words reached the ears of the man she was watching, for, the motor in the portico having at last got under way and left the road clear for Their Highnesses, the Prince threw back his head as the carriage moved on, and looking up met Mrs. Vanderstein's eyes fixed admiringly on him.

She drew back her head in some confusion, but the Prince was still looking up when the barouche disappeared in the shade of the portico.

"Madame! Son Altesse vous a reconnue!" cried Madame Querterot, her face wreathed in smiles.

"He never saw me before," replied Mrs. Vanderstein, retreating into the room. "How odd that he should have looked up just then! What a charming face he has." And she subsided once more on the sofa, her own face aglow with excitement and pleasure.

"Don't move from the window, Barbara, whatever you do," she said. "Just think if we had missed them!"

As Madame Querterot resumed her rubbing, a knock came at the door, and Mrs. Vanderstein's maid entered bearing the jewels her mistress intended wearing that night at the opera. As she set the cases down on the dressing-table and busied herself in laying out the various garments of her mistress' evening toilet, she cast from time to time disapproving glances in the direction of Madame Querterot, whom, although a compatriot, she disliked very heartily, considering that in the privacy of Mrs. Vanderstein's chamber any ministrations besides her own were unnecessary, and having altogether a strong tendency to look upon her countrywoman as an interloper, who had possibly an eye to a share in various perquisites for which Amélie preferred to see no other candidate in the field.

She took an elaborate gown from the wardrobe and spread it out upon the bed together with divers other

articles of attire. She placed a jug of hot water in the basin and a jar of aromatic salts beside it.

She straightened several objects on the dressing-table, which had no need of being made straight; tilted the looking-glass forward and tilted it back again; lifted up a chair and set it down with a thud; and finally, despairing of ever witnessing the departure of her dreaded rival, was about to leave the room when her mistress' voice called her back.

"Amélie," she said, "just show me what necklace you have brought up for me to-night. Is it the one with the flower pendants or the stone drops?"

Amélie carried all the cases over to the sofa; and Madame Querterot left off rubbing while Mrs. Vanderstein sat up and opened them one by one.

In the largest a magnificent diamond necklace, imitating a garland of wild roses and their leaves, glistened against its blue velvet background. The other cases, when opened, displayed bracelets and a diamond tiara, as well as rings and a pair of ear-rings formed of immense single stones.

Mrs. Vanderstein shut them all up again and handed them back to Amélie.

"Take them down again to Blake," she said, "and tell him I have changed my mind and will wear the emeralds instead. They go better with that dress."

"Ah, madame," sighed Madame Querterot, as Amélie departed with the jewels, "what marvellous diamonds! Wherever one goes one hears the jewels of Mrs. Vanderstein spoken of."

"It is true," said Mrs. Vanderstein, "that my jewels are very good. My dear husband had a passion for them and collected stones as another man collects bric-à-brac. He never made a mistake, they say, and my ornaments are rather out of the way in consequence.

For myself I feel it an extravagance to lock up such a vast amount of capital in mere gewgaws."

"My poor Eugène," said Madame Querterot, "had also this same enthusiasm for precious stones. He loved so to adorn his wife with diamonds, that dear soul! But with him it was, alas, more than an extravagance. It was our ruin; for he was not a connoisseur, like monsieur votre mari, and when the crisis came and we would have turned my jewellery back into money, behold, we were told that we had been cheated in our purchases, and that, for the most part, the stones were without value. Ah, the sad day! As you know, madame, bankruptcy followed, and we had to give up our beautiful *établissement* in Bond Street. It broke the heart of that poor Eugène. He never recovered from the blow and soon left me, I trust for a happier world, by way, it goes without saying, of purgatory," added the masseuse, crossing herself like a good Catholic. "Since that day I have faced the troubles of this life alone, without friendship, without sympathy."

Here her emotion overcame Madame Querterot, and she turned away for a moment with a display of her handkerchief. She had omitted from her affecting narrative the fact that "that poor Eugène" had perished by his own hand, on discovering the state of his affairs; and she slightly trifled with the truth when she asserted that it was his unfortunate craze for covering his wife with jewels which had brought about such a disastrous state of things. It was Madame Querterot's own passion for the adornment of her person that had resulted in the dissipation of Eugène's savings, and brought him, at the last, to see with despair the total disappearance of the business, which she had neglected and ruined.

Mrs. Vanderstein's kind heart was touched.

She had heard vaguely the reason of the Querterots' removal from their gorgeous Bond Street rooms after the death of Eugène, the incomparable hairdresser, and it was from a creditable desire not to desert the unfortunate that she continued to employ the little Frenchwoman since the day of the catastrophe. But no details of the affair had reached her, and she now heard for the first time, and not without being sincerely moved, the sad story of a man who, having spent his all in lavishing tokens of affection on his wife, had in the end reduced her to a state of poverty bordering on want, and even left her to confront this terror in solitude, as a result of his misdirected tenderness.

Considerably affected, she tried to speak words of comfort to the poor woman.

"It is dreadfully sad," she murmured. "Poor Madame Justine, how sorry I am. Your poor husband, I see well how he must have adored you and that what he did was all for the best. But you are not absolutely alone in the world, are you? Have you not a daughter?"

"Yes, it is true, madame, that I have a daughter," replied Madame Querterot, wiping her eyes and resuming her work.

"And she is no doubt a great comfort to you?"

"Children, madame, are at once a joy and a trouble," returned the masseuse evasively.

"I hope your daughter has not caused you much trouble."

"She has given me nothing but worry since the day she was born. Her childhood, her education, her illnesses! Measles, chicken pox, whooping cough, mumps, scarlet fever; she has had them all one after the other."

"But not while you have been coming to see me!" cried Mrs. Vanderstein, alarmed.

"Ah no, madame, all that is long finished," replied Madame Querterot, "but since then I have been obliged to provide for her education, and every year she has become more expensive. Now she is eighteen, and you would imagine her anxious to repay some of the expense and *ennuis* she has caused me during all these years."

"Yes, no doubt," agreed Mrs. Vanderstein, "she will be a great help to you now."

"So one would think. But figure to yourself, madame, what this young girl proposes to me to do with her life. She desires to enter a convent and to spend her days in good works rather than be of assistance to her mother!" and Madame Querterot laughed bitterly.

"I think she ought not to take such a decisive step at present," said Mrs. Vanderstein; "at the age of eighteen she can hardly know if a religious life is really her vocation."

"She is obstinate like a donkey, madame. Just think of it, a young girl, healthy, not ugly; already she has had offers of marriage. There is a young man, very *bien*, very *comme il faut*, who demands her hand and who thinks of nothing but her. But will she take him? No. Not at all. We prefer to be a religious; and *voilà!*"

Madame Querterot, having finished her massaging, was repacking the brown bag in which she had brought her apparatus.

"I hope that you will amuse yourself at the opera, madame," she went on, folding her apron and laying it on top of the other things in the bag, the lock of which clicked as she shut it down with an impatient snap.

"A demain, mesdames," she concluded, taking up the bag by the handle and giving it a shake as if she only wished she could so shake her unsatisfactory child. "A cette heure-ci, n'est-ce pas?"

And with that she bowed herself from the room.

CHAPTER III

MRS. VANDERSTEIN and Barbara hurried over their dinner and were early in their places in Covent Garden. Mrs. Vanderstein always arrived before the orchestra had tuned up. She had, like many of her race, a great appreciation of music and did not like to miss a bar of the overture, even though she had already heard the opera that was being given so often that she knew it by heart.

She felt very much in a mood to enjoy herself that evening, and till the first act was over leant back in her chair with half-closed eyes, hardly moving at all, and absolutely absorbed in listening to the wonderful singers who were that night interpreting Puccini's melodious work. Even the Royal box opposite barely distracted her attention for more than a few moments.

Barbara Turner was not musical, but she, too, was always pleased to go to the opera. She liked the sensation of luxury, which enveloped her there even more than elsewhere ; she liked the feeling that the entertainment offered them was costing a huge amount of money, and therefore could only be witnessed by a privileged few. Although she laughed at Mrs. Vanderstein's passion for Royalty, she shared her simple satisfaction in the knowledge that the box in which they were now sitting was sandwiched between that occupied by the Duke of Mellinborough on their left, and the one tenanted by Sir Ian Fyves, the sporting Scotch millionaire.

Barbara rejoiced in the exclusiveness obtainable by the rich, therein differing from some other people who depreciate the advantages of wealth on the grounds that the largest fortunes may be made and handled by the most vulgar, and that banking accounts are not in these days the exclusive property of the refined, or even of the intellectual.

Mrs. Vanderstein made no secret of the benefit to her health derived from hours spent in the closest proximity to the aristocracy, the air inhaled by a duchess being separated from that which filled her own lungs merely by the thinnest of partitions. She invariably occupied the chair on the left-hand side of the box, so that the space between her and her unseen neighbours might be thought of in terms of inches; and it cannot be denied that Barbara herself relished the thought of the company of the great who surrounded her, heedless though they might be of the pleasure they were providing. It was not really to be expected, besides, that the nearness of Sir Ian Fyves, whose horse had already so easily won the Derby the year before, and who was again the lucky owner of the favourite for the coming contest, should leave unmoved the daughter of Bill Turner, the trainer.

All Barbara's childhood had been passed at Newmarket, and the talk of the racing men with whom her father associated had been the first to fall on her infantile ears. The horses in his charge had grown to be her chief interest in life, as they were that of every one she was brought in contact with; and at the age of ten she knew as much about them—their points, prowess, value, and chances—as any stable boy on the place. On a small but truculent pony she followed her father and his friends to the heath in the early mornings and watched the morning gallops with a critical eye; with the same edifying companions she pottered about

the stableyard during most of the rest of the day, and only when bed-time came—and it came at eight o'clock, for on that one point her father was firm—was she reluctantly torn away.

All Mr. Vanderstein's horses were trained by her father, and many a time the childish eyes followed them to victory.

In earlier days, before Barbara had made her bow upon the scene, Turner had been associated in various affairs of business with Mr. Vanderstein, then plain Mr. Moses Stein, familiarly known to his intimates of those days by the endearing nickname of Nosey Stein ; sometimes in moments of rare affection, when some particularly brilliant *coup* had just been brought off, he was alluded to as Nosey Posey.

Mrs. Vanderstein, then Miss Ruth Hengersohn, had changed all this. The name of Stein was repugnant to her, though it seems a good enough sort of appellation in its way ; Nosey or Nosey Posey she could only think of with a shudder ; while the idea of being herself known as Mrs. Nosey filled her with a burning determination, which, as it cooled, hardened to the inflexible consistency of chilled steel.

Before their marriage took place, Mr. Stein, who always admiringly recognised, when he met it, a will more adamant than his own, had at great trouble, inconvenience, and expense changed his name for that of Vanderstein, by which he was afterwards known.

The enterprises, chiefly connected with the promotion of companies, in which this gentleman had, in his early, forgotten—and best forgotten—youth, the assistance and co-operation of Mr. William Turner, were in their nature precarious and not a source, unfortunately, of the profit foreseen by those who set out upon them.

At the conclusion of one of them, indeed, things took on a very unexpected complexion, assuming in the twinkling of an eye so disagreeable a hue, that the directors of the company, whose management was suddenly the centre of attraction and which was in danger of receiving a most unwelcome, if flattering, attention from the public prosecutor, thought it best to disappear with a rapidity and unobtrusiveness highly creditable to a modest desire for self-effacement at a moment when free advertisement was within the grasp of each of them.

Luckily for Mr. Stein, his name did not appear among those who sat on the board of this particular company and he was able to pursue his way in a retiring and profitable manner; but it was otherwise with his less fortunate friend, Bill Turner.

It was to the search for this worthy though too incautious person that the efforts of the authorities were principally directed; and it was only by returning once more, under an assumed name, to the racing circles which he had during a short interval forsaken for the city, and still further owing to the absence of the chief witness for the prosecution, whose whereabouts could not for a long time be ascertained, that Turner was able to escape the fate which ought assuredly to have been his.

He settled finally at Newmarket, and married the daughter of a neighbouring squire, who never spoke again to a child who could so far forget her father's position and ignore his commands as to unite herself to the more than questionable William.

The poor lady, however, took her revenge on her relations, and her leave of a world in which she had found time to suffer some disillusions, on the day that saw Barbara ushered into the light; so that the little girl was left to grow up entirely in that odour of the

stables which her father preferred, in his heart, to any more delicate perfume.

It was not until she was ten years old that Turner began to suffer from the attentions of blackmailers, but these, having once discovered him, saw in him a mine of gold which they fondly expected to prove inexhaustible. Such, however, was not the case. After a year's persecution the wretched man found himself penniless, and on the advice of Vanderstein, the only one of his old pals who did not ignore him in his trouble, he left the country with precipitation and secrecy.

So little was his intention suspected that he eluded all further detection and bolted successfully to South America, where he remained untraced by undesirable acquaintances and finally drank himself to death after several years of the most gratifying obscurity.

Turner's only regret at leaving England was that he could not take with him his little girl; but hampered by the company of a child escape would have been impossible, and he sorrowfully yielded to the representations of Vanderstein on that point.

The Jew promised to take charge of Barbara in the future, and assured Turner with every mark of solemnity that as long as he or his wife lived the girl should not lack a home. Turner, who knew that Vanderstein never ceased to chafe under a sense of obligations incurred in the early days of their struggles, placed every confidence in the words, and had no doubt that his friend would live up to his promises.

And Vanderstein did not fail to do so.

Barbara, whose grief at parting from her father was intense and pathetic, was comforted as best might be and sent to school at the select academy of the Misses Yorke Brown at Brighton. Here she received the best of educations in the company of about thirty other young ladies, the daughters of well-to-do middle class

people. In their society she obtained a nodding acquaintance with algebra, history, science, and literature; with them she attended dancing classes, learnt a little French and German, and disported herself on the tennis court and hockey field. She roller-skated and played golf, became proficient in the art of swimming, and with a chosen and fortunate few rode daily on the downs.

At the end of six or seven years she had grown into a self-possessed, capable young woman, a little old for her years perhaps, as was obvious to those who knew her well, but to outward appearance still a mere child, easily amused at trifles, and with a rare capacity for enjoying life, which made her a delightful companion.

Her face had an innocent and helpless expression at variance with her real nature, which was eminently self-reliant and independent. She would never forgive her mother's relations who had despised her father, and at any mention of them her large blue eyes would always flash resentfully.

Her relatives for their part made no effort to seek her out and were quite content to leave her to the Vandersteins' tender mercies.

Before Barbara left school Mr. Vanderstein died, leaving in his will a provision to the effect that his widow was to continue the care of his friend's daughter, either making her an annual allowance of £500 a year or taking her to live with her as friend and companion. There was a further bequest of £30,000 to Barbara, which was to become hers on Mrs. Vanderstein's death.

This was not the only thing in the will which filled Mrs. Vanderstein with indignation.

She found to her disgust that half the fortune, which she had formed the habit of considering hers, was left to young Joe Sidney, the son of her husband's sister. This lady had committed the horrid offence of marrying

a Christian, and to her, during her lifetime, the orthodox and scandalised Moses never alluded. Her death occurred a year or two before his own, and after it Mr. Vanderstein had displayed a certain interest in his nephew, but not enough to prepare his wife for his preposterous action in regard to the division of his money. Indeed, he expressed in the will his wish that after her death it should all go to Joe, though he left the final decision on this point to her judgment.

Old Vanderstein had amassed considerably over half a million sterling during the latter and most prosperous portion of his career, so that his widow was not altogether the pauper she was fond of declaring herself; but in the first shock of seeing her income divide itself by two she decided to save the £500 provided for Barbara and to submit instead to the infliction of her presence.

She had never seen the girl, who had, indeed, been a subject of disagreement between her husband and herself, but she was so easy-going and good-natured at heart that a very short period of Barbara's society had sufficed to change her prejudices and distrust into a warm affection, and she soon looked on her as she might have done on a younger sister.

There were occasions certainly when, if anything annoyed her, she would not refrain from pointing out to Barbara how much had been done for her and how exaggerated had been Mr. Vanderstein's views in this direction.

"My dear husband," she would exclaim, "would have ruined himself, if he had lived longer, by his own unbounded philanthropy. He was constitutionally unable to say 'no' to anyone, and goodness knows in what difficulties he would have landed himself if time had only been afforded him. How often he would admit to me that certain people had tried to borrow

from him and that he had let them have what they wanted. In vain I begged him to be more firm. He would make me promises, but I would soon discover that he had been doing the same thing again. 'My dear,' he would reply to my reproaches, 'I have really not the heart to refuse to help these poor young men.'"

Mr. Vanderstein did not bother his wife with details of his private affairs, holding that women have no concern with business; and he decidedly never thought it necessary to mention that he used a certain discretion in his benevolence, steeling himself against more supplications than she suspected.

It was true, however, that he never refused to lend money to such poor young men as were heirs to entailed estates or could offer other satisfactory security for the repayment of his kindness, and it was by these unobtrusive charities that his fortune was collected.

Mrs. Vanderstein's prejudices against Joe Sidney had also decreased very rapidly when she became acquainted with that young man, as she did shortly after his mother's death, and by the time this story begins—that is to say, three years after she herself had been left a widow—he had become a great favourite of hers, although there were still moments when she thought a little bitterly of the large sums he had deprived her of by the fact of his existence. However, she liked him well enough to let him know that it was her intention to comply with Mr. Vanderstein's wishes in regard to the ultimate disposal of his fortune, and that her will constituted Sidney her sole legatee.

As she was only a few years older than himself and of a robust health, there was every likelihood that this provision would not affect his fortunes for many years to come, or even that she might survive him.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN that night, during the interval between the first and second acts of the opera, the door of the box opened and Sidney made his appearance, Mrs. Vanderstein greeted him with a beaming smile and the most sincere pleasure.

"How nice to see you, dear Joe," she said. "I didn't know you were in London."

"I only came up from York last night," said her nephew, "or I should have been to see you before. The Garringdons asked me to their box, which is more or less under this, so I couldn't see if you were here, but I thought you would be."

He sat down and began to talk about his doings and to ask questions about theirs, Mrs. Vanderstein looking at him meanwhile with a feeling of gratification at the decorative effect on her box of this good looking youth. She hoped the audience, or at least some members of it, had noticed his entrance, and she thought to herself that even inconvenient nephews had their uses.

Joe Sidney was twenty-five years of age and his father's son. The late Mr. Sidney had been a very tall, fair individual, and Joe resembled him, showing the merest trace of the Jew in the droop of his nose, which, however, was not very marked. His eyes too, perhaps —but why pick to pieces a young man who really was, taken altogether, a very fine specimen of his kind?

Though he had not, or scarcely had, inherited the appearance of his mother's race, he showed much of its sympathy with art and music; and his intelligence was equalled by his prepossessing manner, which had made him a favourite since his boyhood with nearly all with whom he came in contact, and, combined with his wealth, rendered him extremely popular in the cavalry regiment in which he was a subaltern. He knew a great many smart people whose acquaintance Mrs. Vanderstein would have given her ears to make, and from time to time he invited her to meet one or two of them at a restaurant dinner or theatre, quite unconscious of the pleasure he was giving; for the very intensity of her longing made Mrs. Vanderstein shy of letting this superior young relative guess at it, and Barbara had never hinted to him at the weakness of his uncle's widow.

Poor Mrs. Vanderstein! One pities her when one reflects that if the good Moses had survived a few years, till the advent of a Radical government which was extremely short of sympathisers in the Upper House, she might have lived to hear him called "My Lord," and have answered with beating heart to the delicious salutation of "My Lady."

She seized the opportunity afforded by Sidney's presence now to gather information about the occupants of the boxes facing them. Did Joe see anyone he knew? Of course she knew by sight every one in the Royal box, except that man behind the Queen. Who was that? Sidney thought it was the Italian ambassador. What a distinguished looking man! And in the next box? Sidney didn't know. And the one beyond that? He didn't know either. Mrs. Vanderstein was disappointed in him. Well, who did he know? Couldn't he tell her anyone?

"Really," said Sidney, "I don't see many, but

there are one or two. That woman with the red face and the purple dress is Lady Generflex, and the man two boxes off hers on the right is Sir William Delaplage. Then that girl in pink who has just taken up her opera glasses is Lady Vivienne Shaw, and the man in the same box is Tom Cartwright, who was at Eton with me. Down in the stalls there are one or two men I know, and I think that's all. Of course there's old Fyves, next door. You know him, don't you ? "

Mrs. Vanderstein gazed with intent interest at the people he pointed out ; and then let her attention wander back to the Royal box while Sidney talked to Barbara.

" Have you been racing ? " she asked him soon.

" Off and on. I went to see my horse, Benfar, run the other day. He came in easily last."

" I don't think that man can ride him well. He's a good horse. I saw him as a two-year-old."

" There's something wrong somewhere, that's certain. If I don't have better luck this year than I had last I shall give up keeping race-horses," said Sidney with decision.

" Oh, you mustn't do that," cried Barbara in a tone of so much distress that Sidney laughed.

" Why do you care ? " he asked.

" I care a lot. I never see anything of racing people nowadays, or meet anyone except you who knows a horse from a centipede. If you give up racing I shall feel that my last link of connection with the turf is severed."

" Why don't you get my aunt to bring you down to Epsom to-morrow ? "

" Oh, she wouldn't like it a bit," said Barbara regretfully.

" I daresay she'd enjoy it enormously. Aunt Ruth, why don't you come racing with me sometimes ? Miss

Turner and I will show you the ropes and you'll probably be plunging wildly by this time next week."

"I hate spending a hot day walking from the stand to the paddock and back again," said Mrs. Vanderstein. "I hate horses and I hate seeing their heels waving round my head on every side, which seemed to me to be the case the only time I went to a race meeting. Nasty vicious animals. The way they are led about among the crowd by people who can't control them is most dangerous, I consider."

"I expect you saw one let off a kick or two out of sheer lightness of heart," said Barbara. "Horses are darlings, really; I wish you knew them as well as I do."

Mrs. Vanderstein not only disliked horses herself, but she strongly disapproved of Barbara's fondness for them. The career of the late Mr. Turner had been unedifying to such a point that even Mr. Vanderstein had been unable to disguise entirely from his wife some of its more notorious features, and Mrs. Vanderstein would have been better pleased if she could have persuaded herself that the girl had forgotten all about the days of her companionship with so undesirable a father.

She had, moreover, no sympathy for speculation in any form, and especially mistrusted that which took the shape of gambling on the turf. Her greatest friend had married a man who had entirely ruined himself by the practice of backing losers; and the sight of the misery and privation that had, in this manner, been brought on a woman for whom she felt a sincere affection left on Mrs. Vanderstein one of those deep impressions that determine many of our strongest opinions and prejudices throughout life. To Mrs. Vanderstein betting was one of the most unpardonable sins. It was true that Mr. Vanderstein had kept a racing-stable and she had never really forgiven him for not giving it

up at her request. But he had always assured her that he never betted.

She turned away without answering, and Barbara's conscience—for she knew how much her friend disliked the subject of the turf—made her think she detected an impatient expression in the back of the white shoulders and told her it would be better to change the conversation. The temptation was too strong, however, and she continued, dropping her voice to a murmur :

" You are going to Epsom to-morrow yourself ? "

" Yes," said Sidney, wondering why she leant so confidentially towards him.

" Well, I wonder if you would be very kind and put a little money on a horse for me. Would it be too much trouble ? "

" Not a bit. What horse is it ? "

" It's a tip Ned Foster sent me. He was one of my father's grooms, you know, and I hear of him sometimes. He used to be very good to me when I was a child. I had a letter from him to-day begging me to back Averstone. He says he's absolutely certain to romp in on Wednesday."

" How much do you want me to put on him ? " asked Sidney.

" I haven't got much, I'm afraid," said Barbara ruefully, " but I've saved a little out of the pocket money your aunt gives me. It's only £20. I wish it was more."

" Are you going to risk your entire fortune ? " said Sidney. " You're a pretty rash young lady, aren't you ? "

" Oh, I must have a flutter. Besides, it's a dead certainty. I'd put a thousand on if I had it."

" What a fearful gambler ! When you've lost as much as I have you'll go a bit slower."

"Have you lost much?" asked Barbara sympathetically. "I'm so sorry. Just lately?"

"Well, yes, since you ask me I don't mind telling you that I have had some rather nasty blows during the last few months. That brute, Benfar, has a lot to answer for, my word!"

"He'll turn out a winner yet," said Barbara hopefully.

"He might come in first if all the other starters tumbled down," said Sidney, with an effort to treat the subject lightly, "but I'm afraid before that happens I shall have to shut up shop. Things can't go on like this. I lost £10,000 over the Lincolnshire meeting, and that's only a drop in the ocean. But I don't know why I'm bothering you with my troubles," he concluded, pulling himself up abruptly.

"I am glad you tell me," she replied simply. "I am so very sorry that you have had such rotten luck. You'd better change it by backing my tip. Ned Foster would never have advised me to put my all on Averstone unless he knew it was a sure thing. He really has a regard for me, I believe, and he often used to say that the day would come when he'd make my fortune and his own. He doesn't approve of betting as a general thing. He's a most steady, cautious kind of individual."

"I wonder," said Sidney. "I think perhaps I'll have a last fling. What are the odds?"

"They're long. Averstone's not supposed to have a ghost of a chance. I think it's about 40 to 1 against him."

"My word, just think if one had a few thousands on him and it came off!" said Sidney. "The bookies would all die on the spot."

"It would be rather annoying for some one," laughed Barbara. "I hope it will come off."

"I'm afraid it would be too good to be true," said

Sidney gloomily, "but it would certainly save the situation if it did. If I lost a very little more I'd have to leave the army."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked Barbara, for the first time realising the graveness of the position for Sidney. "How dreadful. I *am* sorry!"

The young man laughed awkwardly.

"It's awfully good of you," he said. "I've been a perfect ass, of course. If I could win back half what I've lost, I swear I'd never back a horse again!"

"I expect your luck will turn," repeated Barbara hopefully. She had all a gambler's instinct of optimism.

But Sidney only laughed again rather recklessly as he got up to go. The interval was over and the people were hurrying back to their seats.

"As the orchestra seems to be going to make another effort," he said, "I must get back to the Garringdons' box. Good night, Miss Turner; good night, Aunt Ruth; I'll come and look you up in a day or two, if I get over to-morrow without being obliged to put a sudden end to my career."

"What did Joe mean by his last remark?" Mrs. Vanderstein asked as the door shut behind the young man's vanishing form. "I don't understand what he meant about putting an end to his career."

"He was telling me he has lost a lot of money lately, racing," Barbara murmured rather reluctantly, for she was not sure if Sidney would like her to repeat what he had said. Still, she thought, it was surely absurd for her to imagine that he would confide in her anything he would hesitate to tell a relation. "I suppose he was trying to joke about that."

"It's nothing to joke about," said Mrs. Vanderstein severely. "Not that I saw anything like a joke. I think it's disgraceful, and I shall alter my opinion of

him very seriously if he really has been betting. But hush, the music is going to begin."

And she was soon entirely engrossed in listening to it.

But Barbara, to whose ear any but the most elementary tunes presented nothing but a confused medley of noises, wriggled rather impatiently on her chair from time to time, as she waited for the act to come to an end. Recollections that had lain dormant for a long time, put away on some high shelf of the wardrobe of memory, had been awakened again by her conversation with Sidney and the letter she had that day received from the old stableman. How happy her childhood seemed when viewed now through the flattering medium of the intervening years, which obscured all that had been disagreeable, and magnified the delights of her unrestrained wanderings and of the free and easy company of her father and her father's delightfully jocular friends.

How they used to laugh at each other's witty remarks, and how she, too, had laughed, joining in the mirth without understanding in the least what aroused it but with enjoyment none the less complete on that account. With closed eyes she leant back against the wall of the box, her lips curved in a smile and her head a little to one side in an attitude of listening. But it was not the voices of the singers she heard. Instead, the thud, thud of galloping hoofs sounded in her ears, coming nearer and nearer, and, mixed with the creaking of leather, the excited snorts of her pony and the jingling of bits. She seemed to see around her the bare, open spaces of the heath and the figures of the watchers, among them herself, crouching low in the saddle with her back to the bitter east winds that sweep across the bleak Newmarket country in the spring. Splendid bracing air, her father used to say, and for her part she had never given a thought to the

weather. Happy, happy times! Oh, that they could return. Why could not Mrs. Vanderstein give her that £500 a year, thought Barbara, and let her take a cottage, however tiny, within reach of a race-course and within hail of a training stable? If only she had a little money of her own. Money was everything, after all. It meant liberty. If Averstone won his race it would be something to the good.

Mrs. Vanderstein, turning to catch her eye at a point in the music which, even more than the rest, gave her a pleasure that asked to be shared, saw only the closed lids and the smiling lips, and with a sensation of gratified surprise said to herself that Barbara was at last developing an appreciation of music.

CHAPTER V

WHEN Madame Querterot left the cool, airy house, which reminded her so unpleasantly of one which was associated principally in her inmost consciousness with the sensation of corporal punishment applied in no niggardly spirit, she turned her steps towards her own home, which was situated in the remotest part of Pimlico.

By the time she got off her bus and set out on foot into the dreary labyrinth of dingy streets, in one of which she lived, the shadows were lengthening fast and the pavement was losing some of the blistering heat accumulated during the day. Madame Querterot climbed rather wearily the flight of steps before her door. When she entered the little shop where Julie sat sewing behind the counter, she passed through it without a word to her daughter, and going into the tiny room, which served as a sitting-room, threw herself into the one arm-chair with something like a groan.

Julie, whose smile of welcome had faded on her lips when she saw the expression on her mother's face, bent again over her work, and for a little while all was still in the tiny, two-storied house.

There was not room for many customers in the shop. Julie often wondered what she would do if more than two came in at the same time, but such an embarrassing contingency had not so far occurred. Quite half the space was taken up by the counter, on which stood a tray containing hair-pins and hair-nets. In one corner

a space was curtained off for such clients as should wish to have their hair dressed or washed. No one had as yet requested this last service. In the window Madame Querterot displayed a few superior articles which had survived the wreck of the Bond Street establishment.

There was a waxen lady, with fair hair wonderfully curled and twisted, who obscured the light a good deal as she stood with her shoulders disdainfully turned to the interior of the room and her snow white nose close against the plate glass, which separated her from the street. Plainly she felt it a come-down to look out on to this gloomy Pimlico roadway. Around her were strewn combs and brushes, bottles of brillantine and china pots containing creams for the complexion, curls and tails of false hair—in some cases attached to gruesome scalps of pink wax—and half a dozen elaborately carved tortoise-shell combs, which the luckless Eugène had invested in in a fit of mistaken enthusiasm shortly after his arrival in England, but which had never received so much as a comment or an inquiry as to price from any of those who had since looked on them.

They had remained, however, a source of pride to Madame Querterot, who would often remark to Julie what an air they bestowed.

Presently, after a glance at the clock, Julie put down her work and came to the door between the two rooms.

"You are back, mother," she said, looking at her gravely.

"So it appears," snapped her mother without raising her eyes.

"I am afraid you must be tired," went on Julie calmly. "The day has been so hot. Will you not take a glass of lemonade before supper?"

"Have you got a lemon?" asked Madame Querterot somewhat less crossly.

" Yes," said Julie.

She opened the cupboard and taking out a lemon, a tumbler, and a lemon squeezer, went about the business of preparing a cool drink for her heated parent.

" Has anyone bought anything to-day ? " Madame Querterot asked when after a few minutes the beverage was handed to her. " Put a little more sugar in the glass."

" A boy came in for a bottle of hair-oil," replied Julie, " and a few women have bought hair-pins and hair-curlers. It has been a dull day."

" We shall soon be in the street at this rate," said Madame Querterot despairingly. " One cannot live on a few packets of hair-pins and a bottle of hair-oil. No. If only we could move to a fashionable locality. Here no one ever comes and we have but to die of hunger."

" We haven't been here very long. We may do better presently. It is the customers whom you massage that keep us from starvation." Julie propped open the door into the shop and taking up her work sat down by the table in the parlour.

" Bah ! Who knows how long they will continue ? They have the skin of crocodiles, all of them. What can I do with it ? Nothing. And in time they will find that out, and I shall be put to the door. What will happen then ? You, I suppose, think you will be safe in your religious house. And your poor mother, you will be able to mock yourself of her then, *hein !* "

" Mother, you know I shall not leave you while you want me. I have not spoken of becoming a nun since father died, have I ? "

" Your father ! " exclaimed Madame Querterot with emotion. " Your father was a poltroon. No sooner did I need his assistance than he deserted me ! "

" Mother ! " cried Julie, and there was that in her

tone which made Madame Querterot's lamentations die away into inaudible mumblings.

The girl did not say any more, but went on quietly with her sewing, till after a while her mother rose to go upstairs.

At the door she paused.

"Bert is coming to supper," she said over her shoulder. "You have not forgotten that it is to-night we go with him to the theatre? He will be here soon, I should think," and she went on up the narrow stairs without waiting for an answer.

Half an hour later, when they sat down to a cold meal, which Julie had carefully prepared—for Madame Querterot was particularly fond of eating and had seen that her daughter early acquired the principles of good cookery—they had been joined by the guest to whom she had alluded.

This was a young man of anæmic aspect, with fair hair that lay rather untidily across a high, narrow forehead. His face, which was pale and thin, was not at first sight particularly prepossessing. The contour of it was unusually pointed, though the chin receded so much that it could hardly be said to exhibit a point. The mouth was weak and large and always half open, so that the teeth, stained brown by the smoking of continuous cigarettes, were not completely hidden when he talked under the straggling little moustache, the end of which he had an unpleasant habit of chewing. The nose was prominent and looked too large for the rest of his face, the eyes, dark and deep-set, seemed to flash with unsuspected fires when talk turned on a subject that interested him. It was they that redeemed the whole man from total insignificance. They were the eyes of an enthusiast, almost of a fanatic. He did not talk much, but seemed content to devour the food set before him and to gaze untiringly

at Julie who sat opposite him at the small square table.

Julie was a very good-looking girl in her way, which was not at all an English way, although the English language came more naturally to her lips than her mother tongue. To tell the truth, she was not very proficient in that, her mother and father having both found it easier, after she began to go to school, to talk to her in broken English. Indeed, after twenty years or so of residence in London that language became as natural to them as their own tongue, and Madame Querterot's French had by now grown quite as anglicised as that of many linguists in her adopted country. She found, however, that many of her customers preferred her to talk in broken English; they liked to feel that here was some one come straight from the gay city to do their pleasure.

Her daughter inherited her mother's oval face and arched eyebrows, but there the likeness ceased. Julie was tall while Madame Querterot was short; she was dark, while her mother was fair, and of a fairness that owed nothing to art. Julie had a straight, short nose and a little rosebud of a mouth, her skin was dark but glowing with health, and the brown eyes, set far apart under the low brow, had a wide-open look of sorrowful surprise as if she found herself in a world that failed continually to come up to her expectations. Bert, it was plain to see, found all this very much to his liking, and was so taken up with the contemplation of it that a great deal of Madame Querterot's conversation fell unheeded on his ears, and his answers, when he made any, were for the most part quite irrelevant.

Madame Querterot had by this time completely recovered her good temper, or at all events displayed the amiability habitual to her in intercourse with strangers. She prattled away about the weather, the

letter she had that day received from her relations in Paris, asked about Bert's work, and showed, and possibly felt, great interest in his meagre replies. Presently she began to talk about the occupation of her own day.

"There is an old lady whom I visit for the massage," she said, "who would make you laugh to see. She is ugly, she is fat, she has the complexion of a turkey! Yet there is no one so anxious as she to become young again. Was she ever beautiful? I do not know; but it is certain that she will not be so again. Every day I find her with a mirror in her hand and every day as I leave her she takes it up again to see if there is any improvement. For all I know she sits like that, gazing at her unsympathetic reflection till the next day when I come once more."

Madame Querterot paused and took a draught of her lemonade.

"A little more sugar, Julie, my cherished, and it would be better still," she said. "In this country sugar is less dear and you are unnecessarily careful of it. If we were in France I would not say so; there, there are *impôts*. But this, one must admit it, is the cheapest place one can live in. That is why one finds here so many Jews. Bah! the Jews! Why does one suffer them? In England as in France one sees nothing else; but even more in England since l'affaire Dreyfus. There is one lady to whom I go daily who would gladly live in France, I think, if it had not become less disagreeable for her race here since that business. But perhaps it is not only on that account that she stays here, now that I reflect. She is not one of those who amuse themselves well in a republic."

"How is that, mother?" asked Julie without much interest, while their guest, for his part, merely grunted indifferently.

"She is more than a Royalist," said Madame Querterot; "she loves to see a head which knows how it feels to wear a crown. She goes every day to watch the Queen drive through the park. Mon Dieu! I think she lives only for that. To-day a Prince passed below her window, and as chance had it he looked up at her as he went. She was mad with joy; one would have said it was the happiest hour of her existence. She said nothing, but I have my eyes! And it is a woman who has everything to make her enjoy life. She is not bad-looking, not at all bad-looking; for a Jewess, even handsome; she is still young, and rich. Oh, but rich!"

Madame Querterot put down her knife and fork and raised both hands in the air to convey the extent of the wealth enjoyed by the lucky Jewess.

For the first time Bert displayed some interest in the conversation, or monologue, as one might more properly call it.

"It's disgraceful," he said, "it ought to be put a stop to. These people! They suck the blood of the poor!"

"The Jews, yes; it is their *métier*," agreed Madame Querterot.

"I don't refer to the Jew especially. What I'm alluding to at the present moment is all these useless rich folk. The drones of the hive, as you may say. These bloated capitalists who occupy the land that ought by rights to jolly well belong to the people. They'd better look out for themselves, I can tell them. There's a day coming when society won't stand it any longer. In other words, we're going to drive them out. Tax them out of their very existence. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

Bert glared triumphantly round as he brought his hand down on the table with a conclusive emphasis which made the glasses on the table jump nervously.

"This Mrs. Vanderstein of whom I speak," resumed Madame Querterot composedly, "has no land so far as I know. She has only a house in London. But she is rich all the same. One sees it at each step. In the house, what luxury! Such pictures! such furniture! such flowers! And automobiles, and boxes at the opera! Such dresses! And above all, such jewels! Oh, she is very rich, that one."

"It's all the same," declared Bert, "whether she spends her money on land, or on clothes, or what not. The point I want to impress on you is that she does spend it, and that while she's living on the fat of the land the rest of us may starve!"

He helped himself as he spoke to another plateful of *œufs à la neige*.

Julie watched him, the shadow of a smile playing about her mouth.

"Have you seen this lady's jewels, mother?" she asked. "I adore precious stones."

"I have seen some of them," said her mother. "To-night her maid brought to her a necklace and bracelets of diamonds, besides a coiffure and rings of great beauty, no doubt without price. But she sent them away again, saying that she would wear others. Those I did not see, but it is certain that she has many, and all wonderful. Every day she wears different ones and, constantly, a string of enormous pearls. Without those last I have never seen her. They are as large as marbles and, to tell the truth, not much more pretty, for my taste. When I tell you that she employs a night watchman, whose sole duty is to patrol the house every night, you will understand that the value of what it contains must be large."

"That's just what these capitalists do," cried Bert excitedly. "They lock away thousands of pounds like that when the money ought to be out in the world

paying just and equal wages. I should like to see it made a criminal offence to wear jewellery."

"But what would happen to the people who make it?" asked Julie. "They would all lose their means of earning a livelihood, is it not so? What would the pearl fisher do, or those who dig precious stones out of the earth? And the polishers and setters? Every industry has a host depending on it for a demand for its labour."

"There would be less need for labour," said Bert more gently, as was always the case when he spoke to her, "if the money was taken from the capitalists and divided among the people."

"Still——" objected Julie again.

Madame Querterot, however, did not propose to listen to an argument on the benefits to be expected from Socialism; she had frequently heard all that Bert had to say on the subject, and it had bored her very considerably. She pushed back her chair and stood up.

"It is half-past seven," she said, "we must put on our hats for the theatre. It begins at nine, but we shall take twenty minutes getting there, and I want to have good places. Come and get ready, Julie."

CHAPTER VI

THE two women went upstairs; Bert lit a cigarette, and retired to smoke in the tiny yard behind the house. Soon he heard footsteps descending, and hastily throwing away his cigarette he entered the little room again just as Julie came into it. She had been quicker than her mother.

Bert did not waste time in preambles. He knew he only had a few minutes at the best.

"Joolie," he began hurriedly, "why do you never let me see you alone? Will you never be any nicer to me?"

"Aren't I nice to you, Bertie? I don't mean not to be."

"You know quite well what I mean. I want you to like me better. Oh, Joolie, you haven't a notion how fond I am of you. It seemed to come over me all of a sudden that day we walked in the Park, when your mother for once didn't come with us. And since then I haven't had a moment's peace. Not a single solitary moment. Wherever I look, whether it's going to the office, or at my work, or after it's done, I seem to see nothing but you, Joolie, and I don't want to see anything else either."

He moved closer to her and she retreated instinctively.

"Don't be afraid! I won't touch you," he said with a certain bitterness. "I know you can't bear the sight of me, but I'd give my life to make you happy."

"Oh, Bert," she said, and her tone was full of contrition. "It isn't true that I can't bear the sight of you. I like you very much, I do indeed. We are such old friends. And it is so nice of you to like me so much, but why can't we go on just being friends?"

"Joolie, Joolie," cried the young man. "You don't understand. I love you, Joolie. I love you so much, dear! Don't you think you could marry me some day? There, I didn't mean to ask you now," he went on quickly, seeing the look on the girl's face, "don't answer me now. I know what you're going to say and I can't bear to hear it. Wait a while and perhaps I shall be able to get you to care for me in time."

Before she could reply Madame Querterot's foot was on the stair, and in another moment she came in smiling and arrayed in her best.

They set out without further delay and proceeded by a succession of buses to the Strand. Descending there, they made their way into one of the neighbouring streets and took their places in a queue of people who were already waiting for the doors of the theatre to open.

Though not by any means the first to enter, they secured good places in the pit and settled down in them to await the beginning of the performance, each of them, in his or her different way, prepared to enjoy the evening to the utmost.

When at length the curtain rose they followed the fortunes of the characters with a breathless intensity of interest, and the play itself formed the subject of a heated discussion afterwards, which lasted all the way home, Julie maintaining that an honest course was always desirable whatever excuses might be adduced for other conduct.

Bert and Madame Querterot held, it appeared, more elastic opinions, Bert declaring that there were people

it was a sin to leave in possession of their ill-gotten gains, and Madame Querterot inclining to the view that if anyone was so stupid as not to be able to keep what they had, small blame need attach to those who were clever enough to take it from them.

She upheld this contention by pointing out that no one did blame the gentleman burglar who formed the central figure of the play ; the heroine herself, who was assuredly in a high degree the pattern of all the virtues, had easily forgiven his little lapses, slips which had been made entirely for her sake.

" For my part," she asserted, " I admire a man of that sort. Not that it is common to find one like him. Most men have too high a regard for the safety of their own skins. But one must admit that the young girl, for whom this brave man took all those risks, was of no ordinary beauty. It is possible that if there were more like her there would also be more lovers, young and ardent, ready to chance prison and the gallows to win the wealth that should make her theirs. Ah, there is no chivalry nowadays," and Madame Querterot heaved a heavy sigh. Possibly she was thinking of the base way in which Eugène had deserted her in the hour of need.

" Wealth is not always enough," said Bert disconsolately, " and, anyhow, wealth is an abomination and a snare. In the ideal socialistic state there won't be any such thing. All riches will be equally divided and every one will have enough to live on, but no more. Anyone who wants luxuries will just have to work for them."

" You look too far ahead, my young friend," returned Madame Querterot philosophically. They were walking up the dark streets that led to her house, Bert having insisted on seeing them home in spite of protests as to the lateness of the hour and the necessity for his getting up early next morning.

"You have brains," she continued, "and you use them, which is not too general. But in this world it is a mistake to show that one is clever. The stupid only dislike one for differing from them in a way that they cannot understand, and clever people actually hate others who dare in this manner to resemble them. If you wish to be loved it is best to appear foolish. No one desires a lover too intelligent to care for their opinions. If you wish to obtain respect do not show yourself unusually brilliant. You will only be thought eccentric or even mad. And finally if you want to make money never allow anyone to suspect that you are not perfectly an idiot. People will be on their guard if they think they have to do with a clever man, but if they think you a fool precautions will seem unnecessary and it will be very easy for you to deal with them to your own advantage."

Bert listened to these remarks with more attention than he usually displayed.

"Do you really think a man has more chance with a girl if he is foolish and rich?" he asked in a low tone. They were walking behind Julie, the pavement having narrowed so as to make it impossible to continue three abreast.

Madame Querterot slackened her pace and fell back a little.

"Run on, Julie, my angel," she called out, "and prepare me a cup of coffee. I feel a kind of faintness and will walk more slowly, if Bertie will give me his arm."

Bert made a gesture of annoyance, and would have left her in pursuit of Julie, who hurried on as she was told, but Madame Querterot clutched at his arm and held him back.

"Stay with me, I wish to speak to you," she said, clinging so tightly to him that without roughness he could not have shaken her off.

"What is it? I want to speak to Joolie," he said crossly.

"You can speak to her any time; listen to me now. You asked me a minute ago if I thought one had more chance with a girl if one was rich."

"Yes." He spoke with returning interest. "You do think so, I suppose?"

"Bert, let me speak. I must tell you that for some time I have seen clearly that you have a tenderness for my daughter. You wish to marry her, is it not so?"

"It is the only wish of my life."

"It is easy to see. You show it in each word, in your whole manner towards her. But let me tell you, my friend, that in my country it is not only the consent of a young girl that is sought by a would-be husband. It would have been more *convenable* if you had approached me, her mother, in this matter."

"Madame Querterot, will you help me? Joolie doesn't seem to care about me. Is there any other man?"

"There is no other man. Julie has an absurd idea of entering into a religious house, but she is a dutiful daughter and will not go against my wishes in that or any other matter. As regards this question of marriage she will, I am convinced, be guided by me. Ah, how she loves me, that child! There is nothing she would not do to please me. I say to you that Julie is not a girl. She is an angel!"

"I know that," grunted Bert; "if you'll help me with her, Madame Querterot, and there's ever anything I can do to show my gratitude, why, you can take it that I'll do it, that's all."

"Ah, Bert, now is the time to prove that. Words, words, words! But if it came to the point what would you do, not to show gratitude, but to win the hand of Julie? That is what I ask myself."

"I'd do anything. By Jove, I believe there's nothing I would stick at."

"Very well. Now, with me as your friend and ally I think you might make certain that my daughter will consent to the marriage. But I, Bert, will never agree to her marrying a poor man. I have other ideas for her, I assure you."

"You know I am poor," said Bert. "I despise riches, but for Joolie I wouldn't raise an objection to them if they were in my reach. But you know very well I shall always be poor as long as this beastly capitalist government has its own way. Some day perhaps things will change."

"Bert," said Madame Querterot, dropping her voice, "it is yourself who have suggested to me a way by which one might become rich. Supposing I were to tell you that I had a plan; that I knew a way by which in a flash you might gain both riches and Julie, and at the same time show your faith in the truth of your own gospel? What then, Bert? Have you a little courage, my boy? Girls do not understand your modern ideas, that every one should be of an equal poverty; they like to have money, they like what money can give them. Did you not hear Julie say this evening that she adored jewels?"

They had reached the door of the shop and Bert turned towards it without answering. But Madame Querterot made as if to continue their walk, and after a moment's hesitation he turned and paced beside her.

"I would give her all the diamonds in the world," he said, "if she wanted them and I could get them for her. What do you suppose I care for my ideas, as you call them? Nothing! Oh, nothing matters beside Joolie! Still, I'm hanged," said Bert, "if I can see what you're driving at."

"I see a way," replied his companion, "of doing a

little good business. For it I need the assistance that a young man like yourself can give. Some one with courage, with determination, and who will not be discouraged by a few apparent difficulties. But to succeed the affair must be kept secret. It is indeed of the most private character. Before I say more, swear to me by your love for Julie that you will die before you repeat a word of what I am going to tell you."

"I swear it," said Bert solemnly.

Madame Querterot gave one more quick, penetrating glance at his pale face and, apparently reassured by the light that burned in the dark eyes, began to talk again in low, persuasive tones as they paced up and down before the little house.

Julie came to the door and cried to them that the coffee was ready; then despairing of an answer she retired to her bedroom, where a light burned for a little while; presently it was extinguished, and Julie in a few minutes was peacefully asleep.

But still her mother and her lover walked and turned on the pavement beneath her window.

CHAPTER VII

THE next day, Mrs. Vanderstein, busy with a watering-can among the pots of roses that during the season adorned her balcony, and keeping a sharp look-out on the entrance to Fianti's opposite, was disappointed not to catch another glimpse of Prince Felipe of Targona whom she thought every minute to see issue from beneath the portico.

"What can keep him indoors on so fine a day?" she asked herself repeatedly, for again the sun smote down on the city out of a cloudless azure.

Having spent the hour immediately after luncheon in this vain expectancy, at the imminent risk of both sunstroke and indigestion, she began to despair of her hopes ever being fulfilled, and went back into the drawing-room, where she threw herself dejectedly into a chair.

"If this weather goes on," she said to Barbara, "we might run over to Dieppe for a few days."

Mrs. Vanderstein was very much in the habit of making sudden excursions to the other side of the Channel; whenever she was bored at home she would dash off at a moment's notice to Dieppe or Ostend.

Barbara enjoyed these trips, but sometimes wished Mrs. Vanderstein would not make up her mind to depart quite at the last minute, as she nearly always did. It was awkward occasionally to have only half an hour given one in which to pack.

"Will you go to-day?" she asked, with a shade of anxiety in her voice.

"Oh, I don't know," Mrs. Vanderstein answered wearily. "I daresay I may."

Barbara walked over to the open window.

"There's Madame Justine coming out of Fianti's," she remarked presently.

"Really?" said Mrs. Vanderstein, getting up and going to Barbara's side. "I wonder what she can have been doing there?"

Madame Querterot was hurrying along the pavement, bag in hand. She looked up at the balcony and made a little smiling bow in response to Mrs. Vanderstein's friendly nod. Then she rounded a corner and was out of sight.

"What a good kind face she has," Mrs. Vanderstein said as she turned back into the house. "It would cheer up anyone, that delightful smile. It always does me good to see Madame Justine."

"I can't think why you like her so much," said Barbara, as she also came back into the room. "I don't think she looks particularly nice."

"Ah, Barbara," said Mrs. Vanderstein, "at your age you are no judge of character. Now I know a good woman when I see one, and I do admire that one. Look at the way she works day and night to support her idle, ungrateful daughter."

"I don't suppose she's so ungrateful as her mother makes out," said Barbara. She seemed determined to see no good in poor Madame Querterot.

In the cool of the afternoon the two ladies drove in the Park and visited one or two of the houses of their friends. It was past six when they returned home, and for once the masseuse was waiting for them. She came forward as Mrs. Vanderstein entered, and her manner showed some excitement. In the background

hovered Amélie, who would have died sooner than allow Madame Querterot to remain alone in her mistress' room, hinting darkly, if vaguely, to the other servants that mysterious and terrible results would have to be expected if such a liberty were accidentally permitted.

"Oh, madame," cried Madame Querterot, "I have such amusing news. At all events I hope that you will laugh and not be offended if I repeat it to you."

"What is it, Madame Justine?"

"Figure to yourself, madame, that this morning I received a summons—but, madame," said Madame Querterot, checking herself on a sudden and casting a look of scarcely veiled malice towards the other occupants of the bedroom, "what I have to tell you is of a nature somewhat private. Is it possible that you permit that I speak with you alone?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Vanderstein; "why not, if you wish. Amélie, I will ring when I want you, please. Barbara, do you mind going away till I call you? Thanks so much. I must hear this amusing story of Madame Justine's."

Barbara and the maid lost no time in obeying, and left the room; but while the one did so with alacrity, her pride preventing her from showing any curiosity, even for a moment, as to what Madame Querterot might have to relate, Amélie was at no pains to conceal the dislike, almost amounting to hatred, which shone in her eyes as she fixed them in an angry stare on her compatriot before she slowly moved towards the door. Some day she hoped to be revenged on this woman, this odious, talkative bourgeoise, for the way in which she had wormed herself, if not into her mistress' confidence, at all events into such familiar impertinent terms with her; when, if Mrs. Vanderstein could but be brought to feel about her, in her bones, as Amélie felt, she would

recognise her for a person to whom an honest woman, let alone a lady at all *comme il faut*, would scorn to address herself.

Her rage and indignation continued to augment as the minutes passed and no bell summoned her back to her duties. Though no fonder of work than her fellows, Amélie's whole soul rose in revolt against the idea that she could be dispensed with. And when at last, after an hour's waiting, both she and Miss Turner were recalled to the bedroom, one of them at least re-entered it with murderous feelings in her heart, which she vented by making faces at the masseuse behind the ladies' backs and vowing to herself that the day of vengeance could not be much longer delayed.

As for Barbara, she was struck immediately she returned to her friend by a suppressed excitement, a restlessness of manner, which seemed to betray that there had been something of personal interest in Madame Querterot's confidences. She did not like, however, to ask what the Frenchwoman had had to tell in private, and as Mrs. Vanderstein did not volunteer any information, but was very silent all the evening, fully occupied apparently with her own thoughts, Barbara was not sorry when bedtime came.

"Do you still think of running over to Dieppe?" she asked, as she said good night.

"To Dieppe!" cried her friend, "good gracious, no! I have all kinds of engagements, and you have forgotten that my box is taken for the gala performance of the opera on Monday. I shall certainly stay in London for the present!"

Clearly Mrs. Vanderstein had forgotten the half-formed intention of the afternoon.

Well, that would not prevent her changing her mind again, thought Barbara, and they might be off across

the Channel in a day or two in spite of to-night's decision.

But days elapsed and no more was said on the subject. Every evening saw Madame Querterot arrive as usual; but now there was always a private interview between her and Mrs. Vanderstein, which left that lady flushed and smiling.

Barbara could not imagine what was happening to cause all these changes. She disliked Madame Querterot and vaguely resented the secret that she felt was being kept from her. Why should Mrs. Vanderstein have secrets with this horrid little Frenchwoman and leave her out in the cold? How could she allow the woman's familiarity? Barbara was both piqued and disgusted at the whole trend of the matter.

On Sunday they walked in the Park with a certain Mrs. Britterwerth, a friend of Mrs. Vanderstein.

After a day or two of clouds and rain, during which people shivered and said it was like winter, the weather had cleared again to the radiant brightness which distinguished that summer from those preceding and following it. The Park was gay with light dresses and brilliant coloured parasols. The flowers, too, were at their best—the rain had come at the right moment for them and the beds were a vision of beauty—but they received scanty attention, as usual, people flocking to the other side of the road, where, to tell the truth, it was very pleasant on the green lawns beneath the trees.

The three ladies strolled up and down in the shade. Mrs. Vanderstein called it taking exercise, and did it once a week for the sake of her figure. Mrs. Britterwerth was really stout and would gladly have sat down after a turn or two, but was not allowed to by her more energetic friend.

"Consider, my dear, what a lot of good it does us," said Mrs. Vanderstein.

Here, presently, they were joined by Joseph Sidney, and soon Barbara found herself walking on ahead with him, while the two others followed them at a little distance.

She had not seen him since the night at Covent Garden, and she noticed with concern that he looked worn and worried.

"I saw that Averstone did no good," she said, as soon as they were out of earshot.

"No," said Sidney shortly.

"Did you back him?" she asked, and knew the answer before he spoke.

"Oh yes," he said, "I backed him all right. He'd have won, I daresay, if I hadn't spoilt his chance with my rotten luck."

Barbara walked on in silence for a minute.

"I'm sorry," she said at length. "It was my fault. I gave you the tip."

"Nonsense," he answered almost roughly. "Your money's gone too."

"Did you lose much last week?" she asked abruptly.

"So much," he replied, "that it's no good trying to hide it from you. It's bound to come out in a few days. The truth is that I've lost every penny my uncle left me and every sixpence I had before. Worse than that! I've lost money I can't pay, and I shall not only have to leave the regiment, but——" he broke off bitterly and slashed with his stick at the grass. "Well, you know what it means," he finished lamely.

"Oh, it can't be as bad as that!" cried Barbara. "Tell Mrs. Vanderstein. She will help you. How I wish I had some money!"

"Do you think she would help me?" asked Sidney. "She would let me blow my brains out first. You don't realise, perhaps, what a violent prejudice she has against betting. Look at this letter. I got it the day

after I saw you at the opera." He pulled from his pocket a large sheet of blue writing paper on which Barbara at once recognised Mrs. Vanderstein's unmistakable handwriting.

"MY DEAR JOSEPH," it ran,

"I hope there is no truth in what I hear about your betting on race-horses. It is a practice I deplore with all my heart and I should be very sorry to see you descend to such unprincipled depths. Without entering upon a long dissertation, I must tell you that, unless you henceforward sever all connection with bookmakers and their kind, I shall think it my duty to depart from your uncle's wishes and leave my money away from you altogether. It pains me to write like this and I trust it is unnecessary, but it is best to have things understood.

"Your affectionate aunt,

"RUTH VANDERSTEIN."

Barbara read the letter in horror-struck silence.

"That's the sort of help I should get from her," said Sidney, as she gave it back to him.

"Something must be done," she repeated dully; "can't you borrow from some one?"

"I've been losing steadily for three years," replied the young man, "and I had to go to the money-lenders long ago. I can't get another penny from them. It's rather funny if you think of how my uncle made his money, isn't it? But perhaps you don't know," he went on hastily, seeing the blank look on Barbara's face. "So that's how it is," he started afresh "It's all up with me, you see. I'm absolutely done for unless I can get £10,000 by next week. I'm pretty desperate, I can tell you. There's nothing I wouldn't do to get the money."

He spoke in emphatic tones, and several of the passing crowd turned their heads to see who it was who so loudly published the unfortunate state of his financial affairs. Sidney was quick to realise the attention he was attracting, and lowered his voice to a more confidential pitch. Neither he nor his companion specially remarked one among those who glanced up at them on hearing the outspoken words, a small spare man with a clean-shaven face and brown hair fading to a premature greyness. Nor if they had done so would either of them have recognised in this correctly dressed, spick and span Londoner, whose well-fitting morning coat and patent leather boots so exactly resembled those worn by Sidney himself and nearly every smart young man to be met with in the Park that day, the well-known private detective, Mr. Gimblet, the man most dreaded by the criminal class of the entire kingdom.

Walking at a more rapid pace than they, he was in the act of overtaking the couple as they strolled along, when something in Sidney's voice, a note of despairing recklessness more than the words themselves that he uttered, aroused his interest and wakened his ever ready curiosity. He continued to walk on without slackening his speed, and did not look back until he had advanced some fifty yards. Then he hesitated, loitered a moment, and finally sat down on one of the green chairs, which stood conveniently unoccupied, just before Sidney and Barbara strolled unconcernedly by.

Before they had passed, Gimblet had made a quick survey of the young man's face, on which signs of worry and anxiety were very plainly to be noted.

"I wonder who it is," he thought; and continued, when they had gone on, to gaze meditatively after the young people.

In his turn he failed to observe two ladies who came up in the opposite direction to that in which his head was turned. Mrs. Vanderstein observed his intent expression as she approached, and following the direction of his eyes murmured to her friend :

" Do you see that man staring at Barbara ? He looks quite moonstruck. She attracts a great deal of attention. Such a dear girl, I don't know what I should do without her."

" You are so good to her," murmured her companion. " The question is rather, what would she do without you ? But she is certainly an attractive young person, especially to men. I wonder that you are not afraid to let that delightful nephew of yours see so much of her."

To Barbara, walking mechanically by Sidney's side, it seemed suddenly as if some strange darkness hung over the face of nature. The lightness of heart with which she had gone forth out of the house, the high spirits natural to her that constituted the only legacy of any value which she had inherited from her father, deserted her now to make place for distress on the young man's account. Nor was it only at the thought of the trouble that had fallen on him that she recoiled horror-struck and that the sunlight took on a quality of gloom, which made the present hour such a dismal one and those of the future to appear encircled in a dusk that deepened, as it receded, till it merged into that utter obscurity over whose boundaries Joe seemed already to be slipping and vanishing. It was the effect of his disaster on her own life that chiefly terrified and shocked her. What would she do without the only man friend of anything like her own age whom she knew in London and whose tastes so much resembled her own ? She would hear no more sporting gossip, be cut off from her one remaining link with the racing

world. What would she do without him if he disappeared as he threatened? What would she do without the only person in the world she cared to see? The only person in the world she cared for. . . . The knowledge came to her suddenly like a revelation and she stumbled for a moment in her walk as she realised with a flash of self-comprehension the full meaning of her dread.

In that instant she saw and realised that to lose Joe Sidney would be, for her, to lose all.

He, occupied in a recital of his troubles, noticed nothing beyond his own almost unconscious relief in speaking at length of the worries he had for so long kept to himself. It was a comfort to have so sympathetic a listener.

Still, not much comfort could be extracted even from that, with the crisis in his life so real and so near at hand, and he was soon repeating his earlier assertions that it was no use talking, and that there was no hope for him of anything but absolute ruin.

"Your aunt. She must, oh, she must help you!" Barbara heard herself saying again.

Again Sidney shook his head.

"You don't understand her. She will act in accordance with her ideas. We Jews——"

"You are not a Jew!" Her voice was indignant.

"My mother was a Jewess. You don't suppose I am ashamed of it? We Jews have stronger convictions—opinions—principles—call them what you like—than Christians are in the habit of hampering themselves with. We are more apt, I should say, to live up to our theories. My aunt looks on gambling as the most deadly of sins. Where you or I perceive a green track and a few bookies, she sees, I do believe, a personage with horns and a tail, brandishing a pitchfork. I'm not at all sure she isn't right. I am at least quite sure

that if I could get out of this mess I'd never go near a race-course or have so much as a look at the odds again as long as I lived. It's not much use saying that now, is it? But believe me, help from Aunt Ruth is out of the question. You may scratch it. This is the end of all for me. I shall just have to go. Drop out, as many better men have had to do before me."

"Oh don't talk like that," cried Barbara. She had pulled herself together, and was thinking clearly and rapidly. "Listen to me. If you can't go to Mrs. Vanderstein with the truth, can't you go to her with" —she hesitated—"something else?"

"A lie," said Joe bluntly. "I don't wonder you think I'd not be above a lie if it could save me. But can you suggest one with which I could go to her and ask for £10,000? If you can, let's hear it, for goodness' sake. But of course you can't. She's not an absolute fool!" He laughed again, a short, hard laugh.

"You don't know Mrs. Vanderstein as well as I do, though you are a relation," said Barbara. "She has weak points, you know. At least she has one weakness. I wonder if you know what it is?"

They had come to the Corner and paused by the rails. Instinctively Barbara turned about, looking to see if Mrs. Vanderstein were within earshot.

"Why, look at her now," she cried.

Sidney, too, turned, and followed the direction of her gaze.

His aunt and her friend had reached a point some fifty yards behind them. Mrs. Vanderstein's face was radiant. A rosy colour dyed her cheeks. Her eyes sparkled, when for a moment she lifted them and glanced in the direction of the roadway. But for the most part they seemed to be modestly cast down and Mrs. Vanderstein appeared interested solely in the toes

of her shoes; these, though of the most pleasing aspect, did not entirely justify the delight the lady seemed to feel in them. She may, perhaps, have been wondering whether or no they touched the ground, for so lightly did she tread that a mere spectator might have felt very grave doubts on the subject. She looked, indeed, to be walking upon air. Even Sidney, unobservant as he commonly was of the expressions of people to whom he was not at the moment talking, could not help noticing her unusual demeanour. Indeed she looked the incarnation of happiness.

"What's the matter with her?" he asked, turning again to the girl beside him.

For answer she made a movement of her hand towards the road.

"Do you see that?" she inquired.

There was very little traffic in the Park on that Sunday evening. A motor or two rolled through, but they were few and far between. Joe saw nothing remarkable or that could, to his thinking, in any way account for his aunt's strange looks. One carriage only was driving by, a barouche occupied by an elderly lady and three foreign-looking men. There was nothing about them to attract attention.

"What in the world is there to see?" he said, in bewilderment.

"In that carriage are Prince Felipe of Targona and his mother," said Barbara, "and Mrs. Vanderstein gets as excited as that whenever she sees any kind of a Royal personage. I don't think," she added truthfully, "that I ever saw her show it quite so plainly, but you can see the effect they have on her. Royalty is what really interests her most in life. You wouldn't believe how much she is thrilled by it. It is an infatuation, almost a craze."

"I had no notion she was like that," said Joe, with

an air of some disgust. "I should never have thought she was such a frightful snob."

"I don't think it is snobbishness with Mrs. Vanderstein," said Barbara. "It's more a sort of romanticness. But I don't suppose you understand. The point is that there's nothing she wouldn't do to meet any kind of a little princeling. And if she once met him, there's nothing he could ask she wouldn't give. After all," she went on in an argumentative tone, "she ought not to let you be ruined. I am sure Mr. Vanderstein never would have. And £10,000 is really so little to her. Why, her pearls alone are worth far more. What does a sum like that matter? It's only four or five hundred a year. She wouldn't miss it a bit."

"I daresay," said Sidney, "but I don't see what good that does me."

"Have you got a friend you can trust who would stretch a point to help you?"

"Not a decimal point as far as cash is concerned. In other ways, I daresay I have got one or two. They'd help me all right, poor chaps, if they'd got any money themselves."

"It's not money. I mean some one who would take a little trouble."

"Oh yes, I think I can raise one of that sort. For that matter," said Sidney, "if you don't mind my calling you a friend, I think no one could want a better one. It's no end good of you to be so sympathetic and let me bore you with my rotten affairs."

The girl turned away her face.

"Of course I am a friend," she said, "but you will want a man, if my idea is any good. Now listen, I have got a plan."

Barbara hesitated. She was very conscious that the idea which had come to her was not one which would commend itself to Joe. A few hours before she would

have scornfully rejected the suggestion that she herself could ever be brought to tolerate such an expedient, but now everything was changed and all her convictions of right and wrong were shaken and tottering, if not entirely swept aside by the fear of the imminent danger to the man she loved. Her one feeling now was that at any cost the peril must be averted, and the question of the moment was how to represent her design in such terms as would prevail on him to see in it a path that a man might conceivably follow and yet retain some remnant of self-esteem.

Very carefully, choosing her words with deliberation, she disclosed to Sidney the plan that to her seemed to offer the only chance of setting his affairs in order. As she expected, he refused at first to entertain the idea at all; undismayed, she returned to the attack and persisted, with Jesuitical reasonings and syllogisms, in showing him that in the method she proposed lay his only hope of obtaining the necessary money. Very slowly and reluctantly he allowed himself to be persuaded. No one could have listened for half an hour to Barbara's cajolements without giving way.

At the first sign of his weakening she redoubled her efforts, and as she talked, refusing to allow herself to be discouraged by Joe's objections and the difficulties he pointed out, he gradually succumbed to her wheedling, and once he had thrust his scruples into the background became nearly as enthusiastic as she was herself.

Before they parted the plan was worked out in every point. It remained but to take the faithful necessary friend of Joe's into their confidence. This, Joe told her, had better be a subaltern in his regiment, by name Baines, luckily in London at the present moment.

"As long," he said with a return to former doubts,

" as old Baines is equal to the job. There's not much he'd stick at, though."

" Yes," said Barbara, and was silent a minute during which the difficulties of carrying out her plan successfully seemed to swarm around her with quite a new vigour. " If anything should turn up," she faltered, " to make this idea impossible, you will try telling Mrs. Vanderstein the truth, won't you? It is a chance, after all."

" Well, it can't make things worse, I suppose," he agreed. " I hope it won't come to that. I don't think it will now; but if it does, I promise, if it pleases you, that I will make a clean breast of it to her."

" Thank you," she murmured; and then as they turned, " there she is now, making signs that we should go back."

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN they had driven away Sidney wandered off beyond the outskirts of the crowd to a lonely spot among the trees, where he walked up and down, whistling softly to himself and pausing from time to time to aim a blow at the head of an unoffending daisy with his stick.

"What an ass I am," he exclaimed presently in heartfelt tones, but a listener who had fancied he was alluding to his foolish gambling on the turf would have been mistaken. His thoughts were engaged on quite a different and much pleasanter subject.

How lovely she had looked! How sorry she had seemed! What sympathy had shone in her eyes as she listened to his discreditable troubles. How determined she had been to find a way out; surely she could not show such interest in the concerns of all her acquaintances.

The way out, by the by, now that he thought of it dispassionately, was hardly, perhaps, quite one that a man could take after all and keep the little self-respect left to him; but it was overwhelmingly sweet that she should have lost sight so completely of all considerations except the one of retrieving his fortunes.

He had always liked and admired her, of course, but never till to-day had he realised what a loyal, brave spirit dwelt behind those sea-blue, childish eyes. There was no girl in the world like her, and was it unduly conceited of him to think she must like him a

little to show such agitation at the tale of his misfortunes? And here he frowned and pulled himself up short. What business had he, a ruined gambler, a man whose career was, to all intents and purposes, at an end, to think twice about any girl, much less to feel so absurdly happy? He determined heroically to banish Barbara from his thoughts, and in pursuance of that excellent resolution walked off across the Park at such a tearing speed that little boys whom he passed asked derisively where the other competitors in the race had got to.

. . . . .

It was on the following morning that Mrs. Vanderstein made certain confidences to Barbara, thereby dashing to earth the high hopes she had built of rescuing Sidney from the ruinous meshes in which he had entangled himself.

To that which Mrs. Vanderstein told her the girl listened at first with incredulity, but a scoffing comment was received with such extreme disfavour that she dared not venture another; and finally, as she heard more and fuller accounts and Mrs. Vanderstein, chafing under a sense of her friend's disbelief, went so far as to produce written evidence of the truth of the story, Barbara was no longer able to deny to herself that the astounding tale was undoubtedly not the joke she had taken it for, but represented the plain facts of the case.

With increasing dismay she heard all that Mrs. Vanderstein had to tell her, seeing her hopes for Joe vanish more completely at each new piece of information; and when at the end of the tale her friend reproached her for her lack of sympathy she had much ado to prevent herself from bursting into unavailing tears.

She was able, however, to summon enough self-

control to find some words of affection, which seemed to fill the requirements of the situation; at all events they seemed to satisfy Mrs. Vanderstein. The girl only made one stipulation, and on this point remained obstinate till the elder lady, failing to shake her determination, was at last obliged to yield a reluctant consent.

As soon as she could escape, Barbara, making the first excuse that occurred to her, ran to her room, where she pinned on a hat without so much as waiting to glance in the looking-glass. Then, snatching up a latch key, she let herself out of the hall door and hurried to the nearest post office.

Several telegraph forms were filled in, only to be torn up and discarded before she worded the message to her satisfaction; and even when she handed it in under the barrier—which protects young ladies of the post office from too close contact with a public who might, were it not for these precautions, be exasperated into showing signs of violence—she was still regarding it doubtfully, and her fingers lingered on the paper as if reluctant to let it go.

It was addressed to Joseph Sidney, and covered more than one form.

"Plan completely spoilt will explain meanwhile try telling your aunt the truth as you promised she will be in at teatime and it will be best to get it over one way or another."

Would he come? she asked herself, as she went back to the house; and all the afternoon the same question echoed in her mind. Would he come? And, if he came and did not succeed in enlisting Mrs. Vanderstein's sympathies, what then?

There seemed no other possible course. In vain,

as she sat beside her friend in the motor, she racked her brains to imagine some way in which Joe could still raise the money if this attempt failed. But she had his assurance that he had already exhausted all practicable means.

Mrs. Vanderstein wished to visit a shop in the Strand, and their way to it led them past the theatre that Madame Querterot had visited a week before, in the company of her daughter and her daughter's suitor.

Large placards ornamented the front of the house, depicting some of the more thrilling episodes of the play. These were varied by photographs of the young actor who played the principal rôle. He was portrayed in immaculate evening dress and in the act of opening the safe ; another picture showed him snapping his fingers at the officers of the law ; and yet a third displayed him as he took—in the fourth act—the heroine to his arms.

Mrs. Vanderstein and Barbara had seen the play, which was making a roaring success, on more than one occasion. Mrs. Vanderstein smiled as she observed the posters.

" That is a good play," she said to her companion. " I can hardly help screaming when he escapes by the window as the police burst into the room. It is almost too exciting. And he, the gentleman burglar, you know, is so good-looking. One can't help being on his side, can one ? And of course one is intended to be. All the honest people are so terribly dull. Besides, of course, he was a count and quite charming really. I don't wonder the heroine forgave him." She put down her parasol, as they turned into a shady street. " Do you know, Barbara," she went on, " I think that sort of play might do a lot of harm. It can't be right to make dishonesty appear so attractive."

Barbara made no reply, and Mrs. Vanderstein, glancing at her in surprise, was still more astonished at the strange look in the girl's eyes.

"What do you think about it?" she asked again.

"It depends on what you call harm," Barbara answered slowly, and as they pulled up at their destination the conversation came to an end.

They went home early and had barely finished tea when Sidney was announced. He looked rather pale and shook hands with Barbara without speaking as she made a hasty excuse and left the room. Going into another sitting-room, she waited in an agony of suspense till the drawing-room door should open and the interview be over for good or ill.

She had not long to wait.

Five minutes had scarcely passed before she heard the sound of hurried footsteps descending the stairs, and a moment later the front door banged behind Sidney's retreating figure. At the same time a bell pealed violently and, before it could be answered, Barbara caught the sound of the swish of silken skirts and the light tread of Mrs. Vanderstein's feet as she ran down a few steps and called over the banisters to the butler.

"Blake," she called, as that portly person emerged from the door leading to the basement. "Is that you, Blake?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Blake, I am not at home in future to Mr. Joseph Sidney. You are never to let him come into this house again. Do you understand?"

"Very good, ma'am." Blake's tones were as imperturbed as if he were receiving an order to post a letter.

"And tell the footmen. I will not see him again on any account whatever. Let it be clearly understood. And, Blake, please telephone at once to Sir Gregory

Aberhyn Jones and say, if it is convenient to him, I should like to see him immediately. Ask him to come at once ; or to come to dinner ; or to the opera. No," she corrected herself, " not to the opera to-night. But ask him to come and see me before I start if he possibly can. It is most important."

" Yes, ma'am." Blake showed no surprise : in moments of distress his mistress always telephoned to Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones.

Mrs. Vanderstein, still in a state of great agitation, retreated to write a letter before dressing for the opera, a matter that demanded, to-night of all nights, both time and undistracted attention.

When she descended to the dining-room all traces of the disturbance caused by Sidney's visit had vanished from her face ; and her expression was again one of joyful expectation, as it had been throughout the day. After writing a hurried note, she had entirely dismissed all memory of her husband's nephew.

It was natural that, in the contest with other interests so enthralling as those which that evening filled the mind of his uncle's widow, Sidney should cease to occupy a place in Mrs. Vanderstein's thoughts ; should become, as he would have expressed it, an " also ran." What was more remarkable was the fact that Barbara's countenance, when she took her place at the early dinner, wore a look of pleasant anticipation almost equalling that of her friend, very different from the signs of anxiety and distress that had been visible upon it during the earlier part of the day. Mrs. Vanderstein had seen nothing of the weeping figure which, after Joe's dismissal, lay with its face buried in the pillows on Barbara's bed trying to stifle the great sobs that shook it in spite of every effort, or even she, preoccupied as she was, would have felt astonished at so complete a recovery of spirits.

The change, indeed, had been instantaneous and coincided with the moment, when, in the midst of her grief, a sudden idea had flashed into Barbara's mind, an inspiration, it seemed, that immediately smoothed away all trouble and made plain the way by which Sidney's difficulties should be removed. How was it possible that she had not thought of it before? The knowledge that Joe would never agree to the means she proposed to take, that the persuasions and sophistries of yesterday would be of no use here, that it would be impossible even to broach the subject to him, she swept from her impetuously. There was no need that he should ever suspect her hand in the matter. Care must be taken; she must act with prudence and caution, and all would be well. One thought only held her mind to the exclusion of all else, the wish to protect and save this boy whom she loved from the consequences of his own folly. Nothing was worth considering except this. No fear of the possible effect on her own life shook her resolution, for what, she thought, is life or for that matter death, if it does not imply the prolongation on the one hand, or, on the other, the cutting short of the ties of affection.

She remembered the reckless air with which Joe had said that this business would be the end of all for him, and with a shudder she told herself that the words could only have one meaning. If by sacrificing her life his could be saved, she would not hesitate to give it. Here plain to her eye was the opportunity to serve him, and whatever the result might be to herself she did not shrink from it. As she dressed for the evening, Barbara smiled gladly to herself and sang softly a little song. One thought disturbed her. Sidney was unaware that his salvation was so near. She could not bear to think of him now, worried and despairing. Yet how could she reassure him without betraying

herself and the great idea? With a little frown Barbara mused over this question, as she stuck a paste comb that Mrs. Vanderstein had given her into the masses of her thick fair hair. Presently she scrawled a few words upon a sheet of paper, and hastily folding it into an envelope tucked it into the front of her dress; then, fearing she was late, she ran down the stairs.

"Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones is out of town, ma'am," Blake was saying as she entered the room.

"Oh well, never mind now," said Mrs. Vanderstein.

Dinner that evening was a silent meal. Mrs. Vanderstein, gloriously arrayed, sat smiling abstractedly at nothing from one end of the small table. So preoccupied was she that she forgot to eat, and Blake was obliged to ask her repeatedly whether she would partake of a dish before she could be brought to notice that it was being handed to her. Once, as, recalled suddenly to the present, she brought her thoughts back with a start from their wanderings and turned with some trivial remark towards Barbara, she noticed with a faint feeling of amusement that the girl was as much engrossed in her own imaginings as she was herself, and was sitting absently pulling a flower to pieces, her great eyes fixed vacantly on the shining pearls that swung suspended from the neck of her friend.

They started in good time, Barbara begging to be allowed to stop for one minute at a post office on the way.

She had, she said, forgotten to reply to an invitation, and thought that now it was so late she had better send an answer by wire. She gave the message, which was already written out and in a sealed envelope, to the footman, together with some money, and told him to

hand it in as it was, and not to waste time in waiting to see it accepted.

The man was back in a minute, and they drove on, to take their places a few minutes later in the long string of motors and carriages which was slowly advancing to the doors of the Covent Garden opera house.

CHAPTER IX

MR. GIMBLET lived in a flat in the neighbourhood of Whitehall. It was a fad of his to be more comfortably housed than most solitary men. The situation was conveniently near to Scotland Yard, where officials were much in the habit of requiring to see him at odd moments. The view from the windows, overlooking the river, was delightful to one of cultivated and artistic propensities, and the rooms, large and well-proportioned, were capable of displaying to advantage the old and valuable pictures and furniture with which it was the detective's delight to surround himself.

Much of his time was spent in curiosity shops, and he was among the first to discover that former happy hunting ground of the bargain seeker—the Caledonian market. Many an impatient member of the Force, sent round from the "Yard" to ask Mr. Gimblet's assistance in some obscure case, had, after kicking his heels for an hour or two in the hall, left the flat in desperation, only to meet the detective coming up the stairs with a dusky, dust-covered picture in his hand, or hugging to his breast a piece of ancient china.

The younger son of a Midland family, which had moderately enriched itself in the course of the preceding century by commercial transactions in which a certain labour-saving machine for the weaving industries had played a large part, Mr. Gimblet had received the usual public school education, and had spent two or

three subsequent years at Oxford. His artistic propensities had always been strongly marked, but his family showing much opposition to his becoming an artist, and he himself having a modest idea of his own genius and doubting his ability to make his way very high up the ladder of success by the aid of talent which he knew to be somewhat limited, he had ended by going into an architect's office, where he had worked with interest and enjoyment for several more years. It was by accident that he discovered his capacity for tracking the most wary of criminals to his hiding place and for discovering the authors of mysterious and deeply plotted crimes. It happened that a workman employed in the building of a house for which Gimblet had provided the design was found murdered in circumstances as peculiar as they were sinister. There appeared to be no clue to the author of the deed, and after a week or two the official investigators had confessed among themselves that they were completely at a loss.

To Gimblet, visiting the scene of the crime in his capacity of architect—but not without an unwonted and hitherto unknown quickening of the pulse—a piece of board nailed upright where it should have been horizontal had proved immediately suggestive ; and its removal had brought to light certain hastily concealed objects, which with one or two previously unnoticed trifles had resulted in the capture and ultimate hanging of the murderer.

This success had led the young man to feel an interest in other mysterious affairs of the same nature ; and it was not long before he found the task of assisting the police in such researches so much more profitable and engrossing than his work as an architect, that he gradually came to give more and more of his leisure to the attempt to discover secrets and to solve problems which at first sight seemed to offer no solution. By the

time he was thirty there was scarcely a crime of any importance that he was not called upon to assist in bringing home to its perpetrator ; and he had entirely abandoned the pursuit of architectural learning for that of criminal mankind.

He refused an invitation to become attached to the official staff, although this was conveyed in terms that were in the highest degree flattering, preferring to be at liberty to decide for himself whether or no he should take up a case. It was the sensational and odd that attracted him ; and he found that quite enough of this came his way to make his occupation an extremely profitable one.

Early on Tuesday afternoon Gimblet sat in his dining-room, contemplating with some satisfaction a large dish of strawberries and a pot of cream sent him by a Devonshire friend. He was finishing a luncheon which he considered well earned, as that morning he had discovered in a narrow back street in Lambeth, and purchased for a mere song, a little picture black with age and dirt, in which his hopeful eye discerned a crowd of small but masterfully painted figures footing it to the strains of a fiddle upon the grass under a spreading tree. Gimblet told himself that it was in all probability from the brush of Teniers, and he had propped it on the dining-room mantelpiece so that in the intervals of eating he could refresh his eyes as well as his body. Beside him lay the day's paper which he had hardly had time to read before going out that morning. He heaped cream upon his strawberries, sprinkled them with sugar, and took, in succession, a spoonful of the mixture, a look at his picture, and a glance at the paper. With a contented sigh he repeated the process.

At the moment he had no work in hand, and no one more thoroughly enjoyed an occasional loaf.

It was good, he felt, to have nothing to do for once; to have time to idle; to eat greedily delicious food; to spend as many hours as he chose in the dusty recesses of second-hand shops; to do a little painting sometimes; even to be able to arrange beforehand to play a game of golf. Gimblet had an excellent eye, and had been rather good at games in early days. He seldom had time now and, if he did go down to a golf ground occasionally in the afternoons, had to resign himself to play with anyone he could find, as he never knew till the last minute whether he would be able to get away.

He thought of going this afternoon, and looked at his watch. There would be a train from Waterloo in half an hour. Just time to finish his strawberries and catch it. That picture would look well when he had cleaned it. He took up the paper again. It must have been a fine sight last night at Covent Garden. And what a list of singers. Gimblet, who loved music, wished he had been there. "The Verterexes might have asked me to their box," he said to himself. "Life is full of ingratitude. After all I did for them."

And then it struck him that he had not done much for the Verterexes after all, beyond nearly arresting Mr. Verterex by mistake for a murder he had not committed.

Gimblet laughed.

Then his thoughts reverted lazily to the pleasures of loafing.

"I think I shall give up work," he said to himself. "Why not? I have enough money put by to keep me, with economy, in moderate comfort. Not quite so many strawberries perhaps," he added regretfully, taking another mouthful, "but what I want is leisure. Yes. I am decided I will do no more work. Let the police catch its own burglars!"

He spoke aloud, and defiantly, addressing himself to the picture.

At that moment his servant came into the room.

"A gentleman very anxious to see you, sir," he said. "I have shown him into the library."

"Ask him to come in here if he's in a hurry," said Gimblet. "I haven't finished lunch."

A minute later the man opened the door again, announcing:

"Major Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones."

Major Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones was a little man with a pink complexion and a small brown moustache. He was short and rather plumper than he could wish, but carried himself very uprightly and with a great sense of his own importance, glaring at those who might be so obtuse as not immediately to recognise it with such concentrated disapproval that it was usual for the offenders to realise their mistake in the quickest possible time. Behind a fussy, self-satisfied exterior he hid a fund of kindness and good nature seldom to be met with. Sir Gregory prided himself on his youthful appearance, was, in his turn, a source of some pride to one of the best tailors in London, took remarkable interest in his ties and boots, trained his remaining hair in the way it should go, and, though he was sixty-five, flattered himself that he looked not a day over fifty-nine.

"I am in luck to find you, Mr. Gimblet," he said, advancing with outstretched hand as Gimblet rose to receive him. "But this is a sad occasion, a very sad occasion, I fear."

"Dear me," said Gimblet, "I'm sorry to hear that. But won't you sit down? I thought as my man said you were in a hurry you would rather come in here than wait for me. May I offer you some strawberries? No? I'm sorry I can't give you any wine, but I'm a

teetotaller, you know. Don't have any in the house. Afraid you'll think me faddy. And now that the servant has gone, may I ask what is the sad event which has given me the pleasure of seeing you?"

"Bad habit, drinking water," commented Sir Gregory, seating himself in an arm-chair by the fire-place. "But nowadays young men have no heads. They can't stand it, that's what it is. Show them three or four glasses of port and they say it gives them a headache. Absurd, sir! The country is rotten through and through. The men can't eat, they can't drink, they can't even dance! They stroll about a ball-room now in a way that would make you sick. In my days we used to valse properly. But they don't dance the *deux-temps* any more, I'm told. They say it makes them giddy! Giddy! Rotten constitutions, that's what we suffer from nowadays. It's the same with all this talk of reforming the army. Compulsory service indeed," the major snorted. "What should we want compulsory service for? In my day one Englishman was as good as twenty Germans or any kind of foreigner. At least he would have been if we'd had a European war, which as it happened was not the case while I was in the Service. But now there are actually people who think that if it comes to a fight it would be an advantage for us to have as many men as the enemy. They ought to be ashamed of themselves, if there's any truth in it. No, no, the army doesn't need reforming, take my word for it. There are a few alterations which I could suggest in the uniforms which would make all the difference in the world, but except for that, what I say is, let sleeping dogs lie."

Having delivered himself of these remarks, Sir Gregory felt in his pocket, drew forth a cigar case, selected a cigar and asked for a match.

"Did you come to persuade me to your views on compulsory service?" asked Gimblet pleasantly as he continued to devour his strawberries, which were now nearly all gone. "Because I'm afraid it's no good. You can't possibly convince me that its adoption is not a vital necessity to the nation."

"I'm sorry to hear you think that," said the other, "for I have the highest opinion of your intellect. Believe me, when you discovered the frauds that were being perpetrated at the Great Continental Bank last year, I marked you down, Mr. Gimblet, as the man I should consult in case of need. And it is to consult you that I am here. I said it was a sad occasion. Well, it is sad for me, but I am not yet, as a matter of fact, quite sure whether or no it is desperately so. What has happened, in a word, is this. A lady to whom I am deeply attached has disappeared."

"Disappeared?" said Gimblet, pushing back his chair. He had eaten the last of the strawberries. "May I ask who the lady is—a relation of yours?"

"Not exactly. She is a Mrs. Vanderstein, for whom, as I have just said, I have a great regard, I may say an affection. In fact," said Sir Gregory, leaning forward and speaking in confidential tones, "I don't mind telling you that she is the lady I have chosen to be the future Lady Aberhyn Jones."

"Indeed. You are engaged to marry her?"

"Not precisely engaged," admitted Sir Gregory, with a slightly troubled look.

As a matter of strict accuracy, he had proposed to Mrs. Vanderstein about three times a year ever since the death of her husband; but Mrs. Vanderstein, although tempted by his title, had already been the wife of one man twice her age and did not intend to repeat the experiment. Still, his friendship was dear to her; he was the only baronet of her acquaintance

and she liked to have him about the house. He had been a director on the board of one of her husband's companies, and, when introduced by him, her pretty face and amiable disposition had quite captured Sir Gregory's heart, so that he had cultivated Mr. Vanderstein's society to such good purpose as to become a constant habitué of the house in Grosvenor Street.

After Mr. Vanderstein's death he lost no more time than decency demanded in proposing to his widow; and, though she refused to marry him, and refused over and over again, yet she did it in so sympathetic a manner and was so kind in spite of her obstinacy that Sir Gregory believed her absence of alacrity in accepting his hand to be prompted by anything rather than a lack of affection. She treated him as her best friend and consulted him on every question of business, to the wise conduct of which her own shrewdness was a far better guide, and had imperceptibly fallen into the habit of never making a decision of any importance without first threshing out the pros and cons in conversation with him. Nothing so strengthened her faith in the soundness of her own judgment as his disapproval of any course she intended to adopt.

"For some reason," Sir Gregory continued after a pause, "Mrs. Vanderstein has never consented to an actual engagement. It is that which makes me so uneasy now. Can it be—Mr. Gimblet, I give you my word I feel ashamed of mentioning such a suspicion even to you—but can it be that she has fled with another?"

He uttered the last words in such a tragic tone that Gimblet, though he felt inclined to smile, restrained the impulse, and, summoning up all the sympathy at his command, inquired again:

"Will you not explain the circumstances to me a little more fully? When did the lady vanish? Have you any reason to think she did not go alone? Was

there some kind of understanding between you, and what did it amount to ? "

" I will be perfectly frank with you," said Sir Gregory, " much the best thing in these cases is to be absolutely candid. You agree with me there ? I thought you would. At the same time where a lady is concerned—you follow me ? One must avoid anything that looks like giving her away. But in this case there is really no reason why I should conceal anything from you. Mrs. Vanderstein has never accepted my proposals. On the contrary she has refused to marry me on each of the occasions when I have suggested it to her. You ask me why ? My dear sir, I cannot reply to that question. Who can account for a woman's whims? Not I, sir, not I. Nor you either; if you will allow me to say so." Sir Gregory's hands and eyes were uplifted in bewilderment as he considered the inexplicable behaviour of woman in general and of Mrs. Vanderstein in particular. " But I have no doubt that in time she would have reconsidered her decision," he went on puffing at his cigar, " that is to say I *had* no doubt until this morning."

" And what happened then ? " asked the detective.

" I came up from Surrey, where I had been paying a week-end visit," pursued his visitor, " arriving at my rooms at midday. My servant at once informed me that Mrs. Vande stein had sent a telephone message yesterday evening, begging me to go immediately to see her and adding that it was most important. I only waited to change into London clothes, Mr. Gimblet, before I hurried to her house in Grosvenor Street. And when I got there, what did I hear ? 'Pon my soul," exclaimed Sir Gregory, taking his cigar out of his mouth, " you might have knocked me down with a feather ! "

" You heard that the lady had disappeared ? "

"Exactly. Not been seen or heard of since last night. Drove away from her own door, they tell me, in her own motor car; and has never come back from that hour to this."

"Did she leave no word as to where she was going?"

"None whatever. She dined early, of course, on account of the opera."

"The opera! In that case what makes you think she didn't go there?"

"Of course she went. Didn't I say so? She drove off to Covent Garden and that's the last that's been heard of her."

"You interest me," said Gimblet. "Was she not seen to leave the opera house?"

"I don't know about that," said Sir Gregory. "I found the servants very much disturbed; and very glad they were, I may say, to see me."

"She has probably met with some accident and has been taken to a hospital," suggested Gimblet. "Have any inquiries been made?"

"I rather think they have been telephoning to the hospitals, but I told them not to communicate with the police till I had seen you. Wouldn't do, you know. She would dislike it extremely, especially if it turns out as I fear and she has gone off with some other man."

"I can't see why she should have done that," said Gimblet. "She was her own mistress, I suppose, and had no need to conceal her movements. Depend on it," he went on, for the anxiety on Sir Gregory's face moved him to pity, "she will be found at one of the hospitals; and I advise you to make inquiries at them. A woman, alone as she was, would be carried to one of them if she were taken ill or met with a slight accident that prevented her for the moment from giving her address."

"But she was not alone," urged Sir Gregory. "Miss Turner, her companion, was with her, of course."

"Indeed," said Gimblet, "you said nothing of there being anyone with her. And what has Miss Turner to say on the subject?"

"She's not there. She's vanished too."

"Really," said the detective. "This is getting interesting. That two ladies should set out for Covent Garden opera house on a gala night and never return from it, is, to say the least, slightly unconventional. Now, before we go any further," he went on quickly, "what do you wish me to do in the matter?"

"I want you to find Mrs. Vanderstein, naturally," returned Sir Gregory, staring at him in astonishment; "I feel the greatest anxiety on her account, the more so since you consider her likely to have met with an accident."

"But if, as you seem to suspect, the lady has gone off deliberately, will she not be annoyed at our seeking her out? Will she not be angry with you for trying to discover her movements if she wishes them unknown?"

"I daresay she'd think it dashed impertinent. But I can't help that. She may be in need of me; in fact," cried Sir Gregory with sudden recollection, "I know she is! Don't I tell you she telephoned for me last night? A most urgent message. That proves she wishes for my help in some matter of importance to her, and how can I assist her without knowing where she is?"

"As you say," said Gimblet, "it does look as if she did not wish to leave you unacquainted with her whereabouts. Well, I have nothing to do just now and if you wish me to make inquiries I will do so with pleasure, though I do not think it will prove to be an affair altogether in my line."

"Thank 'ee. Thank 'ee," mumbled the old soldier

with his cigar between his teeth. "That's what I want. Now, how are you going to set about it?"

"I am going to ask you a few questions first. You have not yet furnished me with that comprehensive clear account in which the trivial details which look so unimportant and may yet be of such moment are never omitted: the lucid narrative so dear to the detective's heart. I do not think, if you will pardon my saying so, that I am likely to get it from you, Sir Gregory."

Sir Gregory glared, but said nothing; and Gimblet continued, with a smile:

"To begin with, who is Mrs. Vanderstein?"

"The widow of a Jewish money-lender." Sir Gregory spoke somewhat shortly. He considered Gimblet's remarks disrespectful.

"Rich, then?"

"Yes."

"Does she live alone in Grosvenor Street?"

"A young lady, Miss Barbara Turner, lives with her."

"And who is she?"

"She is the daughter of an old pal of Vanderstein's. A man who used to train his racehorses at Newmarket. He was a bad lot and had to fly the country long ago. Dead now, I believe."

"Has Miss Turner any money of her own?"

"Old Vanderstein left her a good large sum, £30,000 I think it is, but Mrs. Vanderstein has a life interest in it. The girl has nothing as long as she lives with Mrs. Vanderstein, who, however, I have no doubt, is most generous to her."

"I suppose you know Miss Turner well? What is she like?"

"Oh, she's a very ordinary girl, rather pretty some people think, apparently. I don't admire the robust,

muscular type that is fashionable nowadays. Mrs. Vanderstein is very fond of her."

"That means you don't like her yourself?"

Sir Gregory hesitated. It was not in him, really, to dislike anyone without very much provocation, but he always had an idea that Barbara was laughing at him, and he cherished his dignity.

"I don't suppose there's any harm in the girl," he grunted at last.

"Has Mrs. Vanderstein the full control of her fortune?" asked Gimblet, after a quick look at him.

"I believe she has, absolutely. But if you think I was after her for her money," exclaimed Sir Gregory in an angry tone and half rising as he spoke, "you're dashed well mistaken!"

Gimblet hastened to reassure him on this point and he sat down again, still grumbling.

"It was Vanderstein's expressed wish that all the money should ultimately be left to his nephew, young Joe Sidney," he explained, "and I am sure his widow would not disregard his ideas on that point."

The dining-room faced south-west, and the afternoon sun, creeping round, already shone full on the small square panes of the casement windows, so that the temperature of the room was rapidly rising to an intolerable warmth. Gimblet thought of the train that was to have carried him to the golf links. It would have been unbearably hot in it, he told himself. And the disappearance of a wealthy lady from her house in London was sufficiently unusual to excite his curiosity. Already his vivid imagination was seething with guesses and speculations. His resolution to do no more detective work was utterly forgotten.

"What is Mrs. Vanderstein like to look at?" he asked abruptly.

"She is quite young," began Sir Gregory, "about

your own age, I should say. She is not very tall and has dark hair and a perfect figure, not one of those great maypoles of women one sees about so much now, but beautifully proportioned and just right in every way. She has wonderful brown eyes and a smile for every one. I think she is most beautiful," concluded her old friend simply.

Gimblet got up.

" I will give instructions about having inquiries made at the hospitals," he said, " though it does seem hardly likely that both ladies should have been hurt, without some news of it having come before now. And then let us go round to the house. I should like to see the servants and hear what they may have to tell. I hope there may, even now, be some tidings awaiting you there."

CHAPTER X

THERE was no news of the missing ladies in Grosvenor Street; but Gimblet interviewed all the servants and heard several facts, which gave him food for thought.

It was from Blake, the butler, that he received most information. It was Blake himself, looking heartily scared, with half his usual pompousness driven out of him by his anxiety, who opened the door to them and, on hearing from Sir Gregory who it was that accompanied him, begged Gimblet to allow him to speak to him for a few moments. They went into the morning-room, a cheerful white-walled apartment, gay with books and flowers, and Blake addressed himself to the detective.

"I'm very glad you've come, sir, I am indeed. Sir Gregory will have told you, sir, that Mrs. Vanderstein and Miss Turner, who lives here with her, went out last night to the opera and have not returned. I have been very uneasy about them and at a loss to know what to do, sir, for Mrs. Vanderstein mightn't like me to inform the police if so be that she's gone away on purpose. But I never knew her to go away without informing me of the fact or without any luggage and leaving no address, though she does go off very sudden sometimes to spend a week or so in foreign parts, Dieppe being her favourite, I may say."

"Indeed," said Gimblet, "was Mrs. Vanderstein in the habit of going abroad at a moment's notice?"

"She went very sudden, when the fancy took her, sir, but not so sudden as this. I've known her say at lunchtime to Miss Turner, 'My dear, we will go to Boulogne by the 2.20 from Charing Cross,' which, lunch being at one o'clock, didn't leave much time for packing, sir."

"No, it wouldn't," agreed Gimblet.

"But in such cases," continued Blake, "the maid would often be left to follow with the luggage, the ladies taking no more than what they required for the night. But nothing was said to the maid yesterday on the subject, and I can't think Mrs. Vanderstein would ever go off like that anywhere, sir, in her evening dress and diamonds."

"Of course, it being a gala night at the opera, she would be wearing jewels," Gimblet assented.

"Yes, sir, and that's partly what makes me feel so upset, sir; I've never known Mrs. Vanderstein to wear so many jewels on one occasion. It would have been well worth anyone's while to rob her last night, sir."

"Really. What was she wearing? Had she valuable jewels?"

"Indeed, yes," broke in Sir Gregory, "the Vanderstein jewels were famous."

"Yes, sir," repeated Blake; "beautiful jewellery indeed. A great responsibility, sir, in a household. But I have them always in a safe in the pantry, where I sleep myself, and if I go out in the daytime it's never without one of the footmen stays in the room all the time I'm away. At night we have a night watchman always on the premises, sir, and it was him that first alarmed me this morning. He came to my door about five o'clock and knocked me up. 'What's the matter?' I called out, thinking at first what with sleep and one thing and another that the house was on fire.

'She haven't come in yet,' he said, and it was a few minutes before I understood what he was driving at. And then I didn't really feel anxious; though we'd all thought it very strange last night, when Thomas, the second footman, who had gone with the motor to Covent Garden, came back saying that he'd received orders that the car wasn't to go back to fetch the ladies at all."

"What? the car was not to go back after the performance?" exclaimed Gimblet.

"No, sir, orders were given to that effect. Still, I thought possibly they were coming home with some friends, and even this morning I said to myself that perhaps they were staying the night at a friend's house, having for some reason not been able to get a cab home. I had no doubt I should get a telephone message at any moment, which would explain the whole of the circumstances. But the morning passed away without our hearing anything whatever, and by the time Sir Gregory called I was just about getting ready to go out and make inquiries at the police station."

Gimblet considered in silence for a few moments.

"Have you noticed anything unusual of late," he asked, "in the habits or demeanour of anyone in the house?"

"No, nothing unusual beyond the fact that Mrs. Vanderstein seemed to be enjoying uncommonly good spirits. I also thought, but it might be it was only my fancy, that you couldn't say the same of Miss Turner. Yesterday she appeared to be very much down on her luck."

"Did the idea of an accident occur to you?" asked Gimblet. "Have you inquired at any of the hospitals?"

"I telephoned to St. George's, sir, but with no result. I didn't know where else to make inquiries."

"I understand," said the detective presently, "that

Mrs. Vanderstein has relatives and friends living in London. Did you communicate with any of them this morning ? "

" No, sir, I did not. I had already telephoned to Sir Gregory last night and heard he was out of town."

" Is there no one else to whom you could have appealed for advice ? I understand that Mrs. Vanderstein has a nephew or nephew by marriage. Does he live in London ? "

" No, sir, his regiment is quartered in the north of England. But it is true," Blake stammered, with some appearance of reluctance, " that Mr. Sidney is off and on in London, according as he is able to obtain leave, and I believe he is up at the present moment."

" I should have thought you would have telephoned to him to-day. Did it not occur to you to do so ? "

Blake hesitated again. He looked from Gimblet to Sir Gregory, then let his eyes roam to the window and round the room as if help might be hoped for from some unlikely source. Finally, they once more encountered those of the detective and, under that compelling gaze, he spoke.

" I did think of it," he faltered, " I should have done so if it had not been for one thing. Mr. Sidney came to the house yesterday afternoon and, I don't like to mention it, sir, but I am afraid that he had words with his aunt. I have no idea what it was about, sir, but he only stayed a few minutes and as soon as he was gone Mrs. Vanderstein called me and gave me strict orders not to allow him to enter the house in future. She seemed very much put out about something and I am sure she wouldn't like me to have any communications with Mr. Sidney now. It isn't my place to allude to such a thing at all, but in the peculiar circumstances, sirs, I hope you will excuse my saying that Mrs. Vanderstein appeared to me to be very much put out indeed."

" Quite so," said Gimblet, " in the peculiar circumstances your proper course is to tell me everything you can, whether it bears on Mrs. Vanderstein's failure to return home or not. I shall be less likely to go astray after some false scent if I have a thorough knowledge of the private affairs of these ladies, and there is no knowing what trifling detail may not turn out to be useful. Now about these jewels, can you tell me what your mistress wore last night? I should also like to see the place you keep them in."

Blake conducted them to the pantry. A small safe let into the wall contained a quantity of jewel cases, for the most part empty. The butler gave Gimblet a list of what they had contained.

" I never knew Mrs. Vanderstein to wear so many ornaments at once," he repeated. " She would mostly wear her pearls and a necklace and perhaps a tiara and a few bracelets and rings, but last night besides these she had the two diamond necklaces sewn on to her dress, and the emerald set, which takes to pieces so as to make one big ornament, was sewn on it too. I don't suppose there were many ladies at the gala performance," said Blake, with some pride, " who wore better jewels than she did—unless it was the Queen herself."

Gimblet requested to be taken over the house, and in the various sitting-rooms he hunted for some evidence of a documentary character to show that Mrs. Vanderstein had not intended to return on the previous evening. He looked on the mantelpieces for an invitation which should have been stuck up there, on the writing tables for something of the same kind. But though cards for different entertainments were not wanting—most of them bearing well-known Jewish names and conveying invitations to musical parties—there was nothing suggesting that the ladies were to

attend one on Monday night. He noticed the subtle odour that hung about the rooms, and his scrutinising eyes noted with delight the many beautiful and rare objects of Mr. Vanderstein's collection.

He would gladly have lingered to examine the pictures that decorated the walls, and the priceless china, which stood on cabinets against the white panelling. But, deferring this pleasure, he continued his methodical search in the expectant company of Sir Gregory and the half-scandalised Blake, who could not decide in his own mind whether he was doing right in allowing a detective, even one so well known as Mr. Gimblet, to turn over his mistress' correspondence in this unceremonious fashion. When the detective's search led him to the door of Mrs. Vanderstein's bedroom, Blake felt himself unable to remain with him any longer, and summoning Amélie from her workroom he turned over to her the duty of keeping an eye on these doubtful proceedings.

The news of the detective's presence had spread through the house like wildfire, and Amélie for her part was burning to assist the great man. Quite unhampered by such scruples as those which were felt by the worthy butler, she dragged open drawers, threw wide the doors of cupboards, thrust any letters she could find into Gimblet's hands and invited him to verify for himself the information, or lack of it, which she volubly imparted. She knew there was nothing enlightening in the letters and did not hesitate to say so. She had read them all long ago.

"That poor lady," she cried, "they have assassinated her to rob her of her marvellous jewels. Ah, but of that I am well convinced," she declared, nodding her head with gloomy satisfaction. "She wore too many —it was to tempt Providence."

Gimblet asked her for a list of the jewels and received the same that he had had from Blake.

"And will you describe to me what clothes Mrs. Vanderstein wore," he asked, "and also those of Miss Turner?"

"Madame had on a dress of white *mousseline de soie*, all *diamantée*," Amélie told him, "ce qu'elle était belle avec cette robe-là! Over it she wore a magnificent cloak of *crêpe de Chine* and silver lace. The cloak is mauve in the daylight, but in the evening one would say that it was pink. She had on silver shoes and white stockings and carried an antique fan of great value."

"And Miss Turner?" Gimblet was writing down her description in his notebook.

"Mademoiselle also was dressed in white, but with a dress much more simple. She had a cloak of flame-coloured brocade that Madame gave her on her birthday. It is lined with white chiffon; nothing can be more chic."

As she spoke she glanced in surprise at Gimblet, who was standing in the middle of the room, his head thrown back, his nostrils expanding and contracting. As each succeeding drawer had been pulled out he had stood there, sniffing appreciation. The vague scent that clung about the lower part of the house was more penetrating here, and with each disturbance of Mrs. Vanderstein's belongings grew stronger. There were flowers about the room, tea roses in many bowls of shining glass; but their faint sweetness was drowned beneath the more powerful smell that pervaded the air.

"Your mistress uses a delicious perfume," said the detective. "Did she always have the same one?"

"It smells good in here, is it not?" said Amélie. "Yes, Madame uses always the same perfume. See, here it is on her table. It sells itself very expensive,

but with one drop one may perfume a whole dress. Everything that Madame touches smells of it."

Gimblet went to the dressing-table and took up the bottle she indicated; he lifted it to his nose and, removing the stopper, took a long, deep sniff. Then recorking the bottle he put it down again with a glance at the label. "Arome de la Corse," he read, and below, the name of a French perfumery celebrated for the excellence and high prices of its products.

"Madame is an admirer of the great Napoléon," explained Amélie helpfully.

"Who does not share her admiration?" rejoined the detective. "And now may I see Miss Turner's room?"

In Barbara's chamber his stay was short. Here was no arresting perfume, very little suggestion of feminine personality. The room was more like that of a boy. Photographs adorned the walls; a few books lay about. A couple of letters were on the table; one was a bill. The other, which Gimblet perused under the sympathetic eyes of Amélie, ran as follows:

"DEAR MISS TURNER,

"I put the money on Averstone as you said. So sorry he wasn't placed. He got away badly and had no luck from the start. In haste,

"Yours sincerely,

"J. SIDNEY."

"Thanks, I think that is all I want just now," said Gimblet, and he turned to leave the room. But Amélie was in no mind to let him go like that. She had hoped for some confidences, that she might have a theory to retail downstairs.

"If Monsieur will listen to my idea," she said, "I will tell him what I believe has happened to Madame.

She has been killed for the sake of her jewels. That is what I think. And it would be prudent before making so many inquiries that one should look for her on the floor of her box at the opera. It is probable that she is there, *la pauvre*, just as they struck her down and left her ! "

" Thank you for your suggestion," replied Gimblet gravely. " I assure you that I will not neglect to visit the box. But I think that the bodies of two ladies, ' struck down ' in it, would have called forth some expression of astonishment on the part of the caretakers."

" Monsieur is laughing at me," began Amélie in injured tones, but Gimblet was already half-way down the stairs.

On the landing outside the drawing-room door Blake was still hovering.

" Ah, there you are," Gimblet said. " Can I see the second footman now ? Thomas, I think you said he was called."

Thomas, being summoned, proved to be a tall lad possessing an honest and ingratiating smile, adorning a fair and open countenance.

" It was you, I think," the detective said to him, " who accompanied the motor last night when it left here with the two ladies ? "

" Yes, sir," said Thomas, " I did, sir."

" And you were told the car would not be required again after the opera ? "

" Yes, sir."

" Can you remember Mrs. Vanderstein's exact words when she gave you the order not to return ? "

" It wasn't Mrs. Vanderstein who told me, sir," said Thomas, " it was Miss Turner. ' Mrs. Vanderstein says she won't have the car again this evening,' she said, and, ' do you understand, Wilcox ? ' she says—

that's the chauffeur, Wilcox is ; she come running down to speak to him just as he put the clutch in and we was moving off—' You're not to come to fetch us to-night after the opera,' I heard every word of course as plain as Wilcox did. ' Very good, miss,' he says, and she ran back through the swing doors. Mrs. Vanderstein had gone straight in and I didn't see her again. We was very surprised, Wilcox and me, as it was the first time that Mrs. Vanderstein hadn't had the motor to bring her home that either of us could remember. But orders is orders," concluded Thomas with an engaging smile at Mr. Gimblet, who ignored it.

" Thank you, that will do for the present," he said ; and, when Thomas had gone, turned once more to Blake.

" How long has Wilcox been in Mrs. Vanderstein's service ? " he asked.

" He was with Mr. Vanderstein before he married," replied Blake. " The same as I was myself, sir. Wilcox was a groom in the old days, but they had him taught to drive the motor some years ago. He's a most respectable, steady man, sir."

" Thanks, I should like to see him," said Gimblet.

Wilcox, it appeared, was in the house at the moment, having come round from the garage to hear if there was any news, and Gimblet had him in and cross-examined him. His story was the same as Thomas', with one small addition.

" Was there anything that struck you as the least unusual ? " Gimblet asked him. " Did you notice anything in the appearance of either of the ladies, or overhear anything they said to each other as they got in or out of the car, that was not perfectly natural ? "

" No, sir, I did not," said Wilcox stolidly. He was rather a fat man with a very horsey look. " Not that I paid any heed to what they might be saying so long

as it wasn't to me they said it. As far as I remember, Mrs. Vanderstein got into the car and Miss Turner after her, and 'To Covent Garden' one of them says to Thomas, and Miss Turner calls out, 'Just stop at a post office on the way.' And so we did."

"Ah," said Gimblet, "you stopped at a post office, did you? Was that quite in the usual course? And which post office did you stop at?"

"It was not in the usual course," admitted Wilcox, "in fact, I don't remember doing it on the way to the opera before. But Miss Turner had a telegram to send. We stopped in Piccadilly and she gave the form to Thomas to take into the office. After that we drove straight on to the opera house."

Thomas, recalled, remembered handing in the telegram, certainly. Didn't know why he hadn't thought of mentioning it before. Miss Turner gave him a sealed envelope with "Telegram" written outside it, and told him to give it with some money to the young person in the office, and not to bother about waiting for the change, as they were in a hurry. He did as she said, and that was all he could tell about it.

Not much information to be collected from Thomas. Possibly Gimblet's face showed a trace of disappointment, for the footman added in a regretful tone:

"I'm very sorry, sir, that I didn't open the envelope so as I could tell you what the telegram was, sir; but the ladies being in a hurry I didn't scarcely have time. If I'd known it was important, or anyway if I'd had a minute or two to myself, I'd have taken a look at it. I'm very sorry indeed, sir."

Gimblet dismissed him somewhat peremptorily. He felt that he was taking an unreasoning dislike for the apologising Thomas, so anxious to ingratiate himself.

CHAPTER XI

IN the morning-room he found Sir Gregory, who had refrained, with an impatient delicacy, from following him further than the drawing-room. He was walking to and fro before the hearth, another big cigar between his lips.

"Well?" he asked, as the detective entered.

Gimblet looked at him with a disapproving sternness.

"If you intend to accompany me further in my investigations, Sir Gregory," he began, "I must warn you that I can allow no smoking. The sense of smell is as valuable to me in my work as it is to a questing hound, and I cannot have red herrings like your cigars dragged across the trail I might possibly be following."

"My cigars! Red herrings!" Sir Gregory stuttered. "This, Mr. Gimblet, is the finest Havana!"

"No doubt," said Gimblet, "as tobacco it is good enough. But if it came straight from Paradise I could not let the strong smell of it interfere with my business. I must keep my nose free from such gross odours, or it will not serve me when I most need it. When we first came into this room it was filled with a perfume all its own. Now that I return I can smell nothing but the taint of your cigar."

Though considerably incensed at Gimblet's choice of words—Sir Gregory nearly choked when he heard them—he controlled his feelings of indignation as best he could, for he was bent on seeing the detective at work. "If the flavour of the best tobacco really

impedes you," said he, swallowing his annoyance, "I will defer the pleasure of smoking until you have arrived at some conclusion. I suppose you have not discovered anything of importance so far?"

"I think I have added to my knowledge by this visit," returned Gimblet, "whether importantly or not it is too soon to say. You did not mention to me, by the way, that Miss Turner had inherited her father's partiality for horses."

"Didn't I? I didn't know it would interest you. Yes; she seems very devoted to riding."

"And to racing," added Gimblet.

"I don't know about that. She's never been near a race-course, as far as I know. What makes you think so? Have you been talking to Blake about her?"

"When a young lady's room is full of pictures of race-horses, and 'Ruff's Guide to the Turf' occupies a prominent position on her bookshelf," said Gimblet indifferently, "it is not really necessary to ask the servants whether she takes an interest in racing. But come, Sir Gregory, I think we have no more to do here. Shall we go back to my flat and see if anything has been heard at the hospitals?"

With a farewell word to Blake they prepared to leave the house, the butler hastening before them to open the hall door. As he drew back the latch and they stepped forth into the street, they were confronted by a grey-haired man carrying a small black bag, who stood with a hand already upon the bell.

"Whom have we here?" said the detective to himself, and taking Sir Gregory's arm he drew him back into the house, leaving Blake to parley with the new-comer.

"No, sir, Mrs. Vanderstein's not at home," they could hear him saying.

The two men retreated to the morning-room but here in a few minutes Blake followed them.

"If you please, sirs," he said, "here is Mr. Chark, Mrs. Vanderstein's solicitor."

On his heels came the stranger.

"You will excuse me coming to see you, gentlemen," said he, fixing his eyes, after a momentary hesitation, upon the detective, "but hearing that Mr. Gimblet was in the house"—here he bowed to that gentleman —"I thought I had better seize the opportunity of offering such help as I may be able to furnish in your investigations. Very little, I fear, still possibly I am in possession of a fact which may as yet be unknown to you."

Mr. Chark, partner in the firm of D'Allby and Chark, was a man of medium height, of medium age, less than medium good looks, and medium intellect. His face and hair were of different shades of grey and, although clean-shaven, he conveyed the impression that he wore side whiskers. His manner and movements were precise and deliberate. He spoke slowly, and as he did so his hands slowly revolved round each other. It seemed as if he were grinding out each word by some secret mill-like process differing from that of ordinary speech.

"I have just heard from the butler," he continued, after Gimblet and Sir Gregory had acknowledged his greeting in suitable terms, "that my client, Mrs. Vanderstein, is absent under circumstances I must be permitted to designate as unusual. That, in short, she went out last night, 'on gaiety intent,' he he! and has not since been heard of. This is very startling news, very strange news indeed. I think I can prove to you, Mr. Gimblet, that Mrs. Vanderstein's continued absence is unintentional."

So saying Mr. Chark unlocked his black bag, which

he had placed on the floor between his feet as if fearing that it might be surreptitiously removed if he did not keep in touch with it, and drew from its dark recesses a letter in a large mauve coloured envelope, which he handed with another bow to Mr. Gimblet.

The detective took it and lifted it to his nose with a look of surprise.

"This," he cried, "is a letter from Mrs. Vanderstein herself."

"Your surmise is correct," said Mr. Chark. "I was unaware that you and my client were acquainted, but I see that you know her handwriting."

"I never saw it before," Gimblet answered absently. He was studying it now with a look of deep interest.

"Indeed. Then, may I inquire your reason for thinking that this document bore her inscription?" Mr. Chark's drawling tones were plainly sceptical.

"Arome de la Corse," murmured Gimblet, as he handed the letter to Sir Gregory. "You, Sir Gregory, know the lady's writing, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Sir Gregory. "It is from her. Will you not read it aloud? Without spectacles, I'm sorry to say, I should find a difficulty in doing so," and he gave it back to Gimblet.

The detective opened the envelope and unfolding the sheet it contained read aloud what was written on it:

"Grosvenor Street:
"Monday Evening.

"DEAR SIRS,

"I shall be much obliged if one of your firm will call on me to-morrow, Tuesday, between four and five o'clock, for the purpose of altering my will. Mr. Sidney has made it impossible for me to contemplate longer the thought of his inheriting any portion of my late husband's fortune. If Mr. Vanderstein were

alive I am sure he would agree with me on this point, but as he is no more and has left the matter to my discretion, it becomes a sacred duty with me utterly to ignore the wishes he expressed, and to alter my will immediately to that effect. Trusting you will make it convenient to call at teatime to-morrow,

"I remain,

"Yours faithfully,

"RUTH VANDERSTEIN."

Gimblet folded the letter carefully, replaced it in the envelope, and handed it back to Mr. Chark.

"We heard something of a quarrel between Mrs. Vanderstein and Mr. Sidney," he said. "I wonder whether she would have stuck to her threat of cutting him off with a penny. People write this sort of letter when they lose their tempers, but very often they have calmed down by the following day."

"You do not know Mrs. Vanderstein, Mr. Gimblet," interrupted Sir Gregory. "She isn't one of those women who fly into a rage about nothing at all, or try to frighten people with threats. She does not suffer from nerves; her health is as excellent as her temper. I am persuaded she wouldn't have written that letter unless she had the gravest reasons for doing so."

"That also is my view," agreed Mr. Chark. "I can endorse Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones's opinion as regards the character of my client, Mr. Gimblet; I can endorse it thoroughly. Mrs. Vanderstein is a level-headed, shrewd woman, far from being driven by every impulse."

"There is something decidedly womanly about the way she considers it her sacred duty to ignore her husband's wishes," commented Gimblet, and then, as he saw the wrathful light flashing in Sir Gregory's eyes, he added quickly, "I hope that Mrs. Vanderstein herself will be able to make everything clear in a few

hours' time at the most. Sir Gregory and I, Mr. Chark, were on our way to see if she had been heard of at the hospitals, at the moment of your arrival. We fear she may have met with some misadventure."

Mr. Chark was disappointed. Beneath his stiff, outer shell there lurked a tiny spark of romantic fire, which had never been entirely extinguished by the stifling routine of the legal casuistries with which D'Allby and Chark principally occupied themselves. Mortgages, settlements of property, the continual framing in a maze of words of those deeds which should mystify any but creatures like himself, to whom their lack of intelligibility meant profitable business; all this systematic dullness had failed to choke that imperceptible glimmer, and at the mere knowledge of Gimblet's presence in the house it had leapt on a sudden to a hot and burning flame. All his life he had cherished a secret regret that his way had not lain along the precipitous bypaths of criminal law, and now his excited imagination saw murder and violence beckoning from all sides, with fingers redly fascinating. He gave a stiff bow at the detective's words, and spoke with a feeling of irritation and a sensation of being played with, which he was careful to conceal beneath his usual precise and colourless tones.

"Indeed," he drawled, his hands revolving as ever in their stroking movement. "I may venture to say that my impression is a different one. Though no detective, I am still, in my capacity of lawyer, able to put two and two together. This letter"—he tapped Mrs. Vanderstein's note—"and the evidence of the butler that a quarrel between my client and her nephew did occur yesterday afternoon in this house, and immediately preceded the writing of this letter; the knowledge that the lady left her home intending to return in two or three hours, but has actually failed to

do so in twenty—these facts, gentlemen, if they convey nothing to you, appear to me to be eminently suggestive."

Gimblet made no reply; but Sir Gregory, whose face had been getting pinker and pinker till it resembled a full-blown peony, burst out with a truculent snort:

"And what do they suggest to you, sir?"

"They suggest," Mr. Chark resumed with apparent calm, "that Mr. Joseph Sidney could very probably inform us of his aunt's whereabouts."

"I have the pleasure of Mr. Sidney's acquaintance," exclaimed Sir Gregory, "and let me inform you, Mr. Chark, if that is your name, that he is a gentleman holding a commission in His Majesty's army. I hope it is unnecessary to say more. Your insinuations are absurd."

"You cannot deny in the face of the facts that matters look very black against this young gentleman," drawled the lawyer.

"Black!" Sir Gregory seemed about to choke. "I consider it black behaviour, sir, to come here and make these libellous and scandalous assertions about an officer and a gentleman. One who, moreover, is, as I gather, entirely unknown to you. Do you know him, sir, or do you not?" demanded Sir Gregory, leaning forward and rapping out an accompaniment to the words with the palm of his hand on a small table which stood near him, so that the flower glasses on it danced and jingled.

"I do not know him, it is true," admitted Mr. Chark, "but I do know that he would benefit to the extent of several hundred thousands of pounds, if Mrs. Vanderstein should die before she found it possible to revise her will. And I have no doubt that she told him her intention of altering it."

"Die? What do you say?" Sir Gregory's voice

came faintly. The rosy colour faded from his cheeks. The utmost horror and astonishment were depicted in his countenance.

Gimblet, at the sight, got up from his chair.

"Mr. Chark," he said severely, "you are letting your imagination run away with you. You are, indeed, talking like a halfpenny feuilleton. There is no reason to take so melodramatic a view while Mrs. Vanderstein's absence still admits of some more or less ordinary explanation. I am going now to ascertain if she has not been discovered in the accident ward of one of the hospitals. Are you coming, Sir Gregory?"

With a word of farewell they left the house, cutting short more observations on the part of Mr. Chark, who followed them, deeply chagrined at being treated with such scant ceremony.

Sir Gregory, as he drove with Gimblet in the direction of Whitehall, returned nervously to the implication of foul play.

"What made him think of such a thing, d'ye think?" he asked. "It is impossible that young Sidney would harm her. A nice civil lad; I have always liked him. Why should he? I'll not believe it." He spoke disjointedly; the suggestion had shaken him.

Gimblet did his best to reassure him, but when they reached his flat, and found that the hospitals had been drawn blank for news of the two ladies, he felt more concerned than he liked to show. Still, the order that had been given to the chauffeur, not to return to the opera house, seemed to point to some intention other than that of going back to Grosvenor Street, and it was still to be hoped that any moment might bring tidings. There were, however, other considerations not quite so encouraging.

Gimblet, who had left Sir Gregory below while he ran up to his rooms, gave some instructions to Higgs,

the man who at times combined the duties of servant with those of an assistant in the more tiresome but necessary details of the detective's work. Then he went down again to break to the baronet, with reluctant gravity, that there was no news.

"We will go to Covent Garden now," he said; and they got into another taxi.

Sir Gregory had become very silent. His face was drawn with anxiety. "What can have happened?" he kept muttering to himself.

To divert his thoughts, Gimblet recalled the suspicion he had harboured at first—that Mrs. Vanderstein had flown with some other admirer. But the fear that she was in danger, or that worse had befallen her, had taken hold of the man, and it was he who now pooh-poohed the idea and found arguments to show its improbability.

"She had no need to run away," he objected in his turn, "she could marry whom she liked. And whoever heard of a woman's taking a friend on a wedding trip? No, if it had been anything of the sort, Miss Turner would have been left behind, we may be sure of that."

At Covent Garden they learnt very little. The box had been cleaned out, and bore no sign of having been used the night before. Gimblet went sniffing round it, but could find no trace of lingering Arome de la Corse. The box opener told them that Mrs. Vanderstein and the young lady who generally came with her had occupied it at the gala performance, and had left before the end of the last scene. She hadn't noticed anything strange or otherwise about either of them, and as far as she knew no one had visited the box during the intervals.

No one, it appeared, had observed their departure from the doors of the theatre. One commissionaire thought he remembered two ladies coming out early

and driving off in a carriage, but he couldn't say, he was sure, what they were like. Might have been young and lovely, or again, might have been old and ugly. He had seen a powerful lot of ladies in the course of the evening, and never had enjoyed what you might call a memory for faces. If it had not been for the lack of that useful talent, the commissionaire concluded regretfully, he would, as likely as not, have been sitting in the hall of a West End club at the present moment, with no more to do than to answer the inquiries of one gentleman for another gentleman. Never had been what you might call the victim of good luck.

They left him testing a shilling doubtfully with his teeth, as if unwilling to believe that his fortune could have changed sufficiently for the coin to be other than a bad one.

It was growing late, the doors of the theatres would soon be open. Already shutters were up in front of shop windows, and the crowds that still filled the streets had no excuse for loitering now there was nothing to look at, nowhere left for noses to be flattened. Instead, every one seemed to be hurrying in one direction, the direction of railway station or tram, or whatever would carry them to their homes. The sinking sun had at last left the streets full of shadows and, though the pavements and walls still radiated heat, a cool breeze had arisen and was rushing in from the river. In open spaces, where the tall walls of houses did not prevent a glimpse of the western sky, one could see a cloud or two slowly climbing the heavens.

The two men walked together in silence for a little way, and then Gimblet stopped, holding out his hand.

"I don't think we can do any more to-night," he said. "Put away your anxieties for a few hours, Sir Gregory; it does no good to worry. To-morrow, if fresh tidings come, we must see what else can be done.

I think perhaps you will be wise to consult the police."

But at this Sir Gregory raised an outcry.

"Well, we will see about that when to-morrow comes," said Gimblet. "In the meantime I must say good night."

Gimblet saw Sir Gregory off in the direction of his club, and then, after a moment's hesitation, hailed a taxi himself, and drove to the residence of the Postmaster-General. He thought that at this hour he had a good chance of finding that Minister at home, and he was not mistaken.

Sir James was in, said the footman who answered his ring, but at the present moment engaged in dressing, before dining early and going to the theatre. He would take up Mr. Gimblet's card.

As luck had it, it had been Gimblet's fortune to render a considerable service to Sir James Mossing, at a date in this gentleman's career when his foot was still insecurely placed on the first rung of the ladder he subsequently climbed; and, as he rose in power, the politician had never failed to show that he gratefully remembered the obligation. The detective had only to wait ten minutes before the man he had come to see hurried into the room, with apologies for keeping him waiting. Gimblet lost no time in explaining the object of his visit, and had little difficulty in obtaining the written order he wished for. Armed with this, he detained the affable statesman no longer, but withdrew quickly and turned his steps homeward.

"Higgs," he said, as his servant met him in the hall of the flat. "I want you to go at once to the post office in Piccadilly and get a telegram which was handed in last evening by a footman. It was in a sealed envelope, which also held the money for the message. It may, or may not, be signed by Miss Barbara Turner.

It was certainly written by her. Here is an order from the Postmaster-General, which will make things easy for you. I have one or two things to do that ought to have been finished this morning or I should go myself. They will take me about an hour, and I hope you will be back by that time."

In an hour Higgs was back. He looked pleased with himself, and proffered the detective a sheet of paper.

"That's right, Higgs, you've been quick," Gimblet commended him.

"They were a little while looking through the forms," said Higgs, "but luckily there was no fuss about giving it to me after I'd shown your card and Sir James' order."

Gimblet was reading the paper. It was a telegraph form addressed to Joseph Sidney, and contained a short message :

"Luck is coming your way at last expect to have good news by Wednesday removing all difficulties."

There was no signature.

"How do you know this is the right one ? " Gimblet asked sharply.

"The young person at the office happened to remember it, sir. It was handed in, enclosed in an envelope, and when she opened it and saw there was no signature she ran out after the footman, intending to ask that the space at the back of the form, where the name and address is requested for reference only, should be filled in. She was only in time to see the motor drive away. Still, it stamped the message on her memory, especially as there was some change to give back."

"She may easily be mistaken," grumbled the detective.

"I thought you might not be satisfied, sir," said Higgs, "so I went on to Grosvenor Street and asked the butler to let me have a specimen of Miss Turner's writing. I didn't tell him why I wanted it, of course. I just let him think a letter had been found and that you wanted something to identify it by," added Higgs, with some pride. He produced a menu as he spoke, written in a large round hand. "Miss Turner always writes the menus in Grosvenor Street," he explained.

Gimblet took it and compared it with the telegram. It was easy to see that both had been written by the same person.

CHAPTER XII

THE next morning dawned grey and boisterous. The English climate was giving an example of that infinite variety to which custom never reconciles the stranger within our gates. Julie Querterot, whose life had been passed entirely in London, suffered from an hereditary sensitiveness to the changes of the weather, and was never able to prevent her spirits from drooping as the barometer fell. Rain and gloomy skies made her dismal even when her whole day was spent within doors, and on this Wednesday morning, when she had done with the business of sweeping and cleaning about the house, and took up her station in the little shop behind the hair-pins and pomades, the view from the window must have had more than its usual depressing effects upon her, for if the unlooked for had happened and a customer had chanced to enter he might have seen that her eyelids were swollen as by the shedding of many tears.

Soon after midnight the storm that had been brewing had burst over the empty streets; for hours the lightning had torn the clouds and the tremendous noise of the thunder had made sleep impossible. All night torrents of rain had fallen, and people lying awake, or at best dozing uneasily, had heard its constant patter. Julie's face, white and weary, looked as if to her at least the night had brought no rest. Sitting in the half-dusk of the shop she took up her work with

slow deliberation ; then letting it fall back to her knee leant her chin upon her palm with a hopeless gesture. She had had no breakfast, and hunger was combining with fatigue to bring her to the point of exhaustion. By her, on the counter where she had put it down, a halfpenny paper lay spread out ; and presently she took it up, and glanced again at the prominent headlines, which in large black type flaunted across the page.

"DISAPPEARANCE OF LADIES FROM THEIR HOME IN WEST END."

"Mystery of Missing Millionairess."

After a while Julie rose and put away her needlework. Going up to her little bedroom, she took from the cupboard a small black hat, and regardless of the weather prepared to go out. Not that she made an elaborate toilette. A neat coat of plainest black was added to her blouse and skirt, a rather tawdry brooch pinned where a button had been torn off, and another, for pure ornament, in a place where it was not needed. It has already been said that Julie was fond of trinkets. and she seemed to derive some slight comfort from them even this morning. Two or three bracelets jingled already on either wrist, and when she had added a pair of gloves her attire was complete. A few minutes later the girl opened her umbrella and stepped into the street ; then, locking the shop door behind her, she set her face westward. The rain was falling less heavily, and before she had taken many turnings it ceased altogether. Julie shut her umbrella with a sigh of relief. Since leaving the house she had not been able to put aside a minor, but still consuming, anxiety, as to the fate of her hat.

. . . .

In his rooms in Whitehall, Gimblet was studying a copy of the same newspaper that lay now neglected in the Pimlico shop. One glance at the headlines had told him to whom they referred, and the paragraph that followed was still more explicit.

"We learn that anxiety is felt as to the whereabouts of Mrs. Vanderstein, a lady residing at No. 90, Grosvenor Street, W. Mrs. Vanderstein left her house on the evening of Monday last for the purpose of attending the gala performance at the Royal opera house at Covent Garden. She was accompanied by a young lady, Miss Barbara Turner, who lives at Grosvenor Street in the capacity of friend and companion to Mrs. Vanderstein. The two ladies drove to the opera in their private motor car, and some surprise was felt by the servants on being told at the door of the theatre that their return after the performance was over was not desired. No alarm, however, was experienced until yesterday morning, when the household awoke to find that neither of the ladies had returned.

"Inquiry at the hospitals, where it was thought the ladies might have been carried in the event of an accident having occurred, were productive of no result, and as the day passed without news of their whereabouts being obtained it was deemed advisable to secure the services of a detective. It is whispered that one of London's most celebrated criminal investigators has consented to look into the matter. Rumours reach us that differences between Mrs. Vanderstein and one of her nearest relatives have more to do with her disappearance than at first seems obvious. Mrs. Vanderstein is the widow of the late Mr. Moses Vanderstein, a financier well known in city circles. She is a lady of remarkable personal attractions, and is a great favourite in Jewish society. Miss Turner is the

daughter of the late Mr. William Turner, of Newmarket, and is not much over twenty years of age. It is believed that the police have a clue to the continued absence of the two ladies, and that foul play is apprehended."

"So," said Gimblet to himself, "it appears that the worthy Mr. Chark has been talking."

As he threw aside the paper, and took up another to see if it also had something to say on the same subject, the bell of the flat rang, and a moment later Higgs announced Mr. Joseph Sidney.

With a scarcely perceptible start Gimblet recognised the young man he had observed in the Park on Sunday.

"I hope I don't disturb you," Sidney said at once, "but they told me in Grosvenor Street that you had been up there asking questions, and so I suppose Sir Gregory has engaged you to look into this business."

"That is so," said Gimblet. "I hope you have come to give me some assistance."

"Why, I wish to goodness I could," said Sidney, "but I never heard a word about it till I saw the paper this morning; and then I couldn't believe it. But I rang up Grosvenor Street pretty quick, and old Blake, my aunt's butler, swears it's gospel. It's a queer thing to happen, isn't it? What can they have done with themselves? Really, women ought not to be allowed out alone. If my aunt couldn't take care of herself, I do think she might have made an effort to look after Miss Turner!"

"It's a queer business indeed," said Gimblet, "and I'm afraid it looks stranger every minute, and very much more serious than it did at first. For here's another night gone by and no news of either of the ladies. And we have no clue, no idea where to hunt, nor anything whatever to go on in our search. I was

in hopes you might have some information to offer me, Mr. Sidney ; you were, I believe, one of the last people who spoke with Mrs. Vanderstein on Monday."

Gimblet looked narrowly at the young man, who, for his part, seemed not altogether at his ease. He hesitated, crossed to the window and drummed with his fingers on the pane. In the detective's ears was echoing a sentence heard above the murmur of the crowd : " I'm pretty desperate, I can tell you. There's nothing I wouldn't do to get the money."

A second later Sidney turned ; and, coming back to where Gimblet sat impassively waiting, drew up a chair upon which he sat himself down with an air of resolution.

" I did see my aunt on Monday, Mr. Gimblet, and to tell you the truth I don't like telling you what she said to me then. One doesn't care about confiding one's private family affairs to strangers. Still, if you think it can be of any possible use . . . Well, the fact is that I had a frightful row with Mrs. Vanderstein on Monday."

" What about ? " asked Gimblet.

" I," Sidney hesitated again, and then continued with a plunge, " I have been losing a great deal of money lately ; I am ashamed to say that I have lost it on race-courses, and that it is a sum far larger than I can afford. I went to my aunt to ask for help. I asked her, in fact, to lend me some money to tide over my difficulties for the present. She was very irate about it. She can't stand betting ; and as soon as I told her she got in a fearful rage and threw me out of the house. That is all the conversation I had with her on Monday. You can understand I don't much like owning up to it, as it's not precisely to my credit." Sidney ended with a rueful laugh.

" Mrs. Vanderstein absolutely refused to help you in any way ? "

"Said she'd see me damned first. Well, you know, she mayn't have put it exactly like that."

"Hardly, I should think. I'd rather have her own words, if you can remember them, please."

Sidney searched his memory. "As far as I can recollect, what she actually said was, 'I will have nothing whatever to do with a gambler like you. Not only will I not give you money now, but you shall never have a penny that is mine to use for that degrading vice. I shall alter my will,' she said, 'and that to-morrow. And never let me see you again. I'll not have you in my house.' That's what she said, and I had nothing to do but to go out of the house like a whipped dog. And I went." Sidney's voice was bitter as he recalled his humiliation, but when he spoke again he had recovered his normal good temper. "Poor Aunt Ruth," he said, "there's a good deal to be said on her side, you know, and just about nothing at all on mine. However, I didn't come to talk about my own rotten affairs. I wonder where she can have got to? There's something uncommon fishy about her vanishing this way, don't you think? Hope to goodness she's not been knocked on the head for the sake of her diamonds, you know."

His tone was light, but Gimblet seemed to perceive a note of genuine anxiety underlying it.

"I hope not, indeed," he agreed gravely.

"I really feel a bit worried about her—her and Miss Turner," went on the young man. "Hang it all, since I've begun confiding in you I think I may as well make a clean breast of the whole show. The fact is I've got a beastly guilty conscience sort of feeling, because I was on the verge, a day or two ago, of playing the dickens of a shabby trick on Aunt Ruth. You can see how badly I want this money, as I told you, to pay my debts next week. Well, I as near as makes no difference

tried to get it out of my aunt by what I suppose you'd call false pretences—which sounds a nice blackguardly thing to do, don't it? I don't suppose anyone's told you that she had a craze for Royalty in any shape? Well, I didn't know it myself till lately, but it seems there's nothing she wouldn't do to get in contact with great people. A friend of mine suggested that we should get another of my pals to impersonate some royal prince, and that I should introduce him to my aunt. The idea was that he should rather make up to her, and then intercede on my behalf, or get the money out of her in some way. I don't think I should have done it when it came to the point, because I saw very plainly the next day what an impossible thing it was to do. And if I'd gone as far as to ask my friend to help, I haven't the slightest doubt he would have told me not to be an ass. But there you are—I did think of it, and it sticks on my conscience now. I shall never get the taste out of my mouth, I believe, and if there's anything you think I could do to be of any use, now that she's gone and mislaid herself, you can understand that I'd do it all the more gladly since I feel I owe her a good turn."

He ceased speaking, crossed one leg over the other, and leant back, looking at Gimblet with an air half ashamed, half ingenuous.

The detective returned his gaze with interest.

"Here," he was saying to himself, "is a young man either very innocent or beyond the common crafty."

"Who was it who suggested this questionable proceeding in the first place?" he asked.

"Oh, I really can't tell you that," cried Sidney; "it can't have any importance, and I'm not so dead to all sense of decency as you naturally think!"

"You say you only contemplated it for a short time. Did you tell your friend ultimately that, on

second thoughts, you didn't like the idea and had decided to give it up?"

"It wasn't necessary. Before I could communicate with my friend I got a message from her—him—my friend, I mean——" Sidney grew scarlet as he realised his slip, but continued hastily in the vain hope of covering it, "a message to say that the plan was ruined. I don't know what had happened, but for some reason, apparently, it was completely off, irrespective of my jibbing."

"And so now," said Gimblet, after a pause, "you have no hope, I suppose, of paying your debts."

A shade crossed Sidney's face as he replied sadly: "Devil a hope."

"There has been no alteration in your prospects since Monday then," pursued the detective; "you have had no better news to-day? Your difficulties have not so far been removed?" He spoke with great deliberation, while one hand, hidden in his pocket, fingered the telegraph form that Barbara Turner had omitted to sign.

Sidney looked up suspiciously, but the little man's face wore no expression beyond one of calm inquiry.

"No," said he slowly, "everything is just as it was. I have heard nothing at all and my prospects are as bad as they can be."

There was something about Sidney that disarmed suspicion, and Gimblet did not fail to be influenced by it. In vain he reflected that the young man was certainly refraining from telling him of Miss Turner's telegram, and deliberately, since Gimblet had purposely reminded him of it by quoting words it actually contained. As he sat considering what should be his next move, the door opened, and Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones was announced.

"Good morning, Mr. Gimblet. Have you any news

for me? No, I see you have not; and there is none in Grosvenor Street, as you doubtless know. Ah, Sidney, how are you? This is a trying time for us all. I am glad to see you, very." He shook hands warmly with the young man; and then, before Gimblet guessed what he would be at, the harm was done. "I'm more than glad to meet you, my dear boy," Sir Gregory was declaring, "so as to be able to tell you that I don't believe a word they may say against you. I'm positive you never had a hand in this black business, any more than I did myself. And all the Charks and beastly rags of newspapers in London shan't convince me to the contrary." Sir Gregory, still holding Joe by the hand, shook it up and down with extra and exaggerated heartiness.

Sidney wrenched it away.

"What the deuce are you talking about?" he exclaimed. "Who's been saying things about me?"

"I tell you I don't believe a word of it," said Sir Gregory soothingly. "But you must have seen it in the papers. 'It is believed,' they say, 'that a quarrel took place between Mrs. Vanderstein and a near relative, which has more to do with the unfortunate ladies' disappearance than seems plain at first.' You did quarrel with her, didn't you? And Chark, her lawyer, you know, is taken with the idea; in fact, he's been round telling me this morning that he's ascertained for a fact that you're infernally hard up, which would provide a motive, he says. Infernal nonsense, of course."

"Infernal lies," cried Sidney; "what the devil does anyone mean by suggesting such things? Do they imagine I've spirited away not only Aunt Ruth but Miss Turner too, and am holding them for ransom, or what? Or perhaps your friend Chark would rather think that I was given to poisoning my relations? If

it comes to that, I'll begin on him if he don't look out. Infernal ass."

He was furious. Gimblet, watching him with interest, wondered whether his face was so red from anger or from some other emotion.

Sir Gregory, for once, was silenced.

"Where's this newspaper editor?" demanded Sidney. "I'm going to kick him, now, at once."

"You'd better wait till he gets up," said Gimblet; "at this hour he's probably still in bed."

"I'll soon get him out."

"Better not take any notice of it. More dignified not to," urged Sir Gregory, repenting too late his well-meant assurances. "Best treat that sort of idiot with contempt," he went on. "Chark's the worst. It's he that's put them up to it."

"Mr. Chark," said Gimblet, "has a longing to be mixed up in a sensational affair. I saw that yesterday. He ought to know better than to indulge in libel, a lawyer too! I daresay he's frightened to death, now that he has done it, and has time to think of the consequences."

"I'll frighten him," said the young man.

He calmed down, however, as the detective continued to pour oil on the troubled waters, and was at last persuaded to depart peacefully.

Gimblet wrote out a short description of the missing ladies, together with the promise of a reward to whosoever should bring news of either of them, and this he gave into Sidney's keeping, charging him to have it inserted in the evening papers, of which the early editions were already appearing in the streets.

CHAPTER XIII

SIR GREGORY lingered. "I suppose there's nothing to do but wait?" he said, as the door closed behind Sidney.

"Not much, I'm afraid," replied the detective. "Believe me, I am doing what is possible, and now that Chark has been talking to the press no doubt the police, on their side, will do what they can. Did you hear anything in Grosvenor Street?"

"No," said Sir Gregory, "no one had been there. They had seen no more of Mr. Chark. But no doubt there will be folks calling to-day. I daresay the street will be blocked by people wanting to know if what they've seen in the papers is true. There's plenty of curiosity about. It was beginning already, from what I could see, when I came away; there were three or four idlers staring at the house. What they thought they saw in it, don't ask me. Expect the police soon moved them on. Too much of this lazy loafing about; I'd soon compel them to do some honest work, if I had my way."

"And yet you're against compelling them to be trained for the defence of the country!" murmured Gimblet. "Well, well! Just ordinary loafers, were they?" he went on.

"That's all," said Sir Gregory, after a moment, during which he glared fiercely at Gimblet.

"Except one young woman," he continued, as an afterthought. "Poor thing, she seemed really dis-

tressed; but more because she thought she'd never see her money than on Mrs. Vanderstein's account."

"One of the maidservants?" suggested the detective.

"No, no, I think not. She came up just as I was leaving the house. 'Oh, sir,' she cried, 'can you tell me if there's any truth in what I've seen in the papers, about the lady that lives here having disappeared? Surely it's not true?' She seemed so much concerned that I explained the state of affairs to her. 'It is true,' I said, 'that the ladies of this house went out on Monday night, and have not yet come back. But I hope we may find out where they are at any moment.' To my surprise no sooner had I said this than she leant back against the door-post as if she were going to faint or something, devilish ill she looked, poor creature, and then quite suddenly covered her face with her hands and burst into tears. I must own," Sir Gregory confessed, "that the sight of so much feeling exhibited on Mrs. Vanderstein's account moved me considerably. A very little more and I should have mingled my tears with those of the poor girl. 'Don't cry, my dear child,' I said, a good deal affected. 'It is natural that those who care for her should feel anxious and upset, but we must show a brave face and hope for the best.' Still, in spite of all I could say, she went on crying, and sobbed very piteously, poor thing; till at last, on my asking her how it was that she was so anxious about Mrs. Vanderstein, she managed to regain control of herself, and said in a doleful tone: 'I'm only a poor girl, sir, and the lady owes us money. If she is lost it means a great deal to me.' I own I was disappointed, having thought her distress prompted by affection rather than mercenary considerations; but people are all alike in this world; self-interest, Mr. Gimblet, that's the only motive that

rules men's actions nowadays. However, I did my best to comfort her, and told her that whatever happened Mrs. Vanderstein's bills would not go unpaid. I can't say I was very successful in my efforts to reassure her and she went off in the end looking dreadfully woe-begone. 'Pon my word, I never saw such a miserable, frightened-looking little creature! I didn't like to let her go without trying to help her in some way, but I hardly knew what to do, for she didn't look the sort one could offer money to," concluded Sir Gregory, who had the kindest heart in the world.

"What was she like?" asked Gimblet with a show of interest.

"A shop girl, I should say, but she had a foreign look about her: a lot of dark hair, and big dark eyes to match, and she was neatly dressed, trim and tidy. You know the sort of way these French girls get themselves up, but all in black or some dark colour. Very quiet and respectable-looking girl. The only thing I thought looked a bit flashy about her was that she wore a heap of common jewellery, bracelets and brooches all over, cheap and nasty; and I could see a string of great beads round her neck under her blouse, imitation pearls as big as marbles. I was astonished, I must say, at her going in for that sort of thing, for in other ways she seemed a very nice, quiet girl. Looked terribly ill, too, poor thing."

"I wonder who she was," said Gimblet. "Do you say she wore her necklace under her blouse?"

"Yes, I could see it through the muslin or whatever it was she had on. Some transparent stuff."

"That was rather curious. Girls of that class, who are fond of decking themselves out with such cheap ornaments, don't generally hide their finery. It's generally quite on the surface, I think."

"I should think it was unusual," agreed Sir Gregory.

"She must have dressed in a hurry, and done it by mistake; don't you think so?"

Gimblet did not answer. He had been wandering about the room, in an aimless fashion, and now he paused beside a table and offered Sir Gregory the contents of a glass jar that stood upon it.

"Have some barley sugar?" he suggested. And, as Sir Gregory indignantly refused: "One must have a pet vice, and after all, this is my only one," said he, putting a large piece into his mouth. But Sir Gregory only shook his head mournfully and refused to smile.

"I suppose," he said after a moment, with a shamefaced look, "that there can't be anything in Chark's idea, can there?" His tone was that of one who pleads to have a disturbing and discreditable doubt utterly removed. Gimblet remembered the warmth of the baronet's protestations to Sidney, and suppressed a smile.

"I think we may hope for a solution less shocking than Mr. Chark's," he said hopefully. "As for whether his suspicions can have anything in them or not, I can only say that they are nothing much more than the wildest of surmises. They amount to this. Mr. Sidney has lost money in a way disapproved of by Mrs. Vanderstein, and, on appealing to her for assistance, was met not only by reproaches but by threats that he would be cut off from his inheritance. On the other hand, Mrs. Vanderstein is not very much older than her nephew, so that his expectations of enjoying that inheritance could never be other than extremely remote, since the lady enjoys the best of health. Mr. Chark does not hesitate to hint that Sidney may have taken his aunt's life, in order that he may at once inherit the money of which he is certainly in urgent need. And if he could contemplate such a deed at all there may be said to be this further inducement, that

in the event of Mrs. Vanderstein remaining alive she would most likely marry again; when, if she had children, she would probably—since she has full power over it—leave most if not all her fortune to them, whatever her late husband's hopes may have been regarding the disposal of it.

"Chark takes these circumstances and finds in them a motive; he then takes Mrs. Vanderstein's disappearance and proceeds to infer from that, that young Sidney has made away with her. His motive may exist, though it is a question whether such a motive is strong enough to induce so terrible a crime in a young man of Sidney's class and upbringing, who is in normal health, and we will presume, for the sake of argument, sane. But Chark has not, as far as I know, a shadow of evidence on which to assert that the lady has been injured in any way; and I think any such conjecture is ridiculous without more to support it; while to suggest it publicly, as he has done, is quite scandalous. It is still perfectly possible that Mrs. Vanderstein or Miss Turner received some urgent message while at the opera, which caused them to leave before the end of the performance. It may have been an appeal for help from some friend in trouble, or something involving a certain secrecy of procedure. There are thousands of possible situations that might arise, to the conduct of which privacy would be essential. Wait, Sir Gregory, at least to see if we get an answer to our advertisements, before allowing your imagination to follow headlong in the wake of Mr. Chark's speculations."

CHAPTER XIV

LATE in the afternoon, Gimblet, returning to the flat in Whitehall, found a visitor awaiting him there.

Higgs, hearing his footstep in the hall, hurried out to meet him and inform him of the fact.

"A young lady, sir. She gave me this card, and wants to see you on business. She's been here about ten minutes, and I've taken tea in to her, not knowing how long you might be, sir."

Gimblet took the card and read: "Miss Seraphina Finner, Inanity Theatre." "Where is she?" he asked.

"In the waiting-room," replied Higgs; and Gimblet went at once into the small sitting-room he set apart to be used by people unknown to him.

As he opened the door Gimblet checked himself for a moment on the threshold with the sensation of entering some one else's room by mistake. His visitor had pushed most of the furniture back against the wall, and was, when he first caught sight of her, in the act of pirouetting round in the middle of the floor, with her skirts lifted high and one foot raised to the level of the mantelpiece. Her back was towards him, but at the sound of the opening door she twisted round with a swinging movement, and confronted him with a laugh.

"They told me you were out," said Miss Finner gaily, and without any trace of embarrassment, "so I just started doing a bit of practising to fill up the time

while the tea is standing. Waste not, want not, that's my motto," she added.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," the detective began; "won't you sit down now?" And he pulled out a chair she had piled with some others in a corner, and offered it to her.

"I suppose I may as well," admitted the young woman; "though it does seem a pity not to do a bit of exercising now I've cleared the room. You see, I dance in 'The Jodeling Girl,' and one has to keep one's limbs supple, or, if you aren't up to the mark one night, they put on somebody else. Fact is," she added confidentially, "that's why they took me on. Dixie Topping, who used to be one of the four of us that do the dance I'm in, let herself get stiff, and one night when it came to kicking William Tell's apple off the boy's head, she missed it clean, and, as it's got to be done in time with the music, that put the conductor out, so when she had another try, and missed it again, he got so mad that they sacked her and put me on. Ill wind that blows no one any good," said Miss Seraphina philosophically.

Her belongings were strewn about the room: a great bouquet of carnations lay on a chair, gloves and scarf were thrown on the bookshelf, while an enormous hat covered with flowers and ribbons was poised on a cabinet. She had drawn a curtain across the window, no doubt out of consideration for her complexion, as Gimblet happened to have chosen for this room hangings of a becoming rose colour; and the air was filled with the reek of inexpensive scent. The detective compared it mentally, and extremely unfavourably, with the Arome de la Corse. Altogether he would not have recognised his own room, to such an extent had ten minutes of Miss Seraphina Finner's occupation removed all former traces of his own individuality. He

actually started as he suddenly noticed, perched on the mantelpiece, a pair of small white animals : a smooth-haired cat with eyes of a greenish yellow, and a dog no bigger, but with a long, silky coat. It appeared to be one of the tribe known to the unappreciative as Fidos, and to the admiring owners as Toy Poms. It stood at one end of the shelf, fidgeting and whining, but not daring to jump. The cat had retired to the extreme opposite corner, where it sat with its paws very close together and its tail curled tightly round them, surveying the restless behaviour of the dog with a look of sleepy disdain. The feelings with which Gimblet saw these two, but more especially the dog, sharing this point of vantage with his best blue and white china may be imagined. He was speechless ; and perhaps it was just as well.

" I hope you don't mind Nigger and Pompom," said Miss Finner, as she accepted a cup of tea, " lots of lumps, please, and heaps of cream too. Seraphina's pets are her inseparable companions ! Don't they look sweet up there ? I put them there to be out of the way while I was on my light fantastic. It bothers me never to know when my foot will come down on one of them, instead of the floor. Pompom seems to enjoy being trampled on by the way he's always in the middle of the room." She seized the woolly dog by the scruff of the neck and deposited it in her lap. " Was you frightened of falling on your heady peady, darling," she murmured, fondling it ecstatically. " No, no, you mustn't lick your auntie's face ; might give you a pain in your little inside. Isn't she a sweet little affectionate thing ? " she asked, raising her eyes for a moment to Gimblet's. " Yes," she went on, as the little dog danced on her knee in a frantic effort to make clear his need to share the cake she had taken, " Pompom shall have a cake too. His auntie wouldn't let her darling

go hungry, no, she wouldn't! And Nigger shall have some cream for a nice treat."

She poured some cream into a saucer and placed it on the floor at her feet. The cat, which had watched the attentions showered on Pompom with the cold eye of indifference, now abandoned its pose of superiority, and jumping lightly to the ground approached the saucer on noiseless, unhurried tiptoes. It began to lap the cream with a genteel, condescending air, and with due regard for its whiskers, shaking its head sharply if a drop adhered to one of their long, stiff hairs.

Miss Finner contemplated the sight with admiring delight.

"Doesn't it do your heart good to see how he likes it?" she asked, "and aren't his manners lovely? Oh, Pompom, what an example he is to you, darling!" she exclaimed, as Pompom snatched at a piece of cake and swallowed it with one gulp. "Try and behave like your brother does, my angel. He's always the same," she went on, "I don't care where you put him, Nigger is always the perfect gentleman. Why! I took them across to Paris at Easter. Didn't know what a trouble I should have smuggling Pompom home again, or I should have left her behind in London. I tied feathers all over her, though, and put her in a bonnet box, so they took her for a hat, the darling. As if any hat was half as beautiful! But, as I was saying, we had a beast of a crossing. Oh my! that channel! And poor Pompom was one of the first to feel it. And much as I love her, I must say, she just gave way, and never made the tiniest little effort to hide her feelings. But Nigger! If you'll believe me, that cat was so ashamed of the way he felt he was going to behave that the tears streamed down his face, and he just mewed and mewed till I could have cried; only being so sick myself I really didn't care, as a matter of fact.

But though he felt so bad he didn't forget his manners and he wouldn't be sick, he simply wouldn't, till I gave him a basin. Then certainly. Oh Lord!" Miss Finner stopped. The recollection was too much even for her; she was also slightly out of breath.

Gimblet listened to her with amusement. Though he wondered vaguely what her business with him could be, he let her run on, supposing that she would disclose it in time. After a moment she resumed in serious tones:

"It's a good thing, don't you think, to have a fad of some kind? It's so hard to get noticed, isn't it? Expect you found that when you started looking for thieves? People won't see that one's any different to anyone else, do what you like. But manage to have something really out of the common about you, and you get your chance. That's what I think. They forget me all right, but they remember my white cat and dog, and after a little they begin to notice me too. I had a pretty hard time at first, I tell you," Miss Finner sighed. "But I'm getting on well now, thanks," she continued, with a return of her former vivacity. "Of course I haven't got a speaking part yet, but I'm doing a dance, and that's something at the Inanity. Some one sent me a diamond brooch last week," she added with pride, pointing to an ugly little diamond star. "What do you think of it? You're a judge of stones, I should think, being always in the society of burglars, as one may say."

Gimblet examined and admired. "I'm afraid, though, I'm not really a judge," he said.

"That's your modesty. But, as you see, I'm prosperous. And it isn't after the reward that I've come. Not that I'll deny that the money would always be useful. Still, it's the ad. I'm thinking about. Will you put my name in the paper now? 'Miss

Seraphina Finner of the Inanity brings news of the missing ladies.' That's what I'd like to see, right across a poster."

A flicker of interest showed itself for an instant on Gimblet's face. "So that's it," he said to himself.

Aloud he answered: "I don't know whether I can promise you that just yet. It rather depends, you know. But if I am called upon to send any communication on the subject to the press, you may be sure that, if possible, your name shall be inserted."

Seraphina pouted. "I call that stingy," she complained. "He might put us on a poster, Pompom, mightn't he? He's an unkind, cruel man, he is."

"What do you know of the missing ladies?" asked Gimblet, disregarding these observations.

Miss Finner assumed an air of importance. "I didn't know anything about it till lunchtime," she said. "Not being what you'd call an early riser, it's not often I take a squint at the newspapers unless it's in the afternoon. But to-day a friend came to see me and we had lunch together. By and by she begins talking about one thing and another, and presently she says: 'Have you read about these ladies that have disappeared?' So I said no, what was it, and she said: 'What! haven't you seen the paper? There's an exciting bit about them in this morning's *Crier*.' When she'd told me all she could remember, I began to get interested. I had a feeling, you know, as if this was in my part. So I sent out for a paper, and they brought in one of the evening editions which had the reward and description of the ladies in it, as well as everything, or so my friend said, that the *Crier* had. I read it all out loud, and when I came to the part about wearing a white dress with mauve cloak heavily embroidered and a large amount of valuable jewellery, I said to myself: 'This, Seraphina, my dear, is where

you walk on.' By the time I'd finished the paragraph I was certain sure. It was just a fluke," said Miss Finner reflectively, " that I ever saw that description or heard anything about it at all, for, as I say, I don't look at the papers more than about once in a fortnight, unless it's the notices of a new show."

Gimblet's murmured comment might have passed for astonishment, agreement, or merely encouragement to proceed. He thought it best to let her tell her story in her own way.

" It's a funny thing," she went on after a moment's silence ; " it seems somehow as if it was meant to be, doesn't it ? Well, the reason why I felt so excited, when I read the description, was because I had seen the ladies later than anyone else. I saw them on Monday night, after they left the opera."

" And where did you see them ? " asked Gimblet, bending over the cat, which, having finished the cream, was rubbing itself in a friendly fashion against his leg, where it left a covering of white hairs on his dark trousers. " Poor pussy," he said, stroking it.

" I was driving home from the theatre in a taxi," said Seraphina. " I live up in Carolina Road, N.W. I don't suppose you know it ; up beyond Regent's Park, to the right, as you may say, of Maida Vale. It was a very hot, sultry night, you remember, and I'd got the cab open so as to get a little air. I was tired for some reason—it's not often you can tire me—and I put my head back, and my feet on one of the back seats, and as near as possible went off into a snooze. That's why I can't tell you exactly which street it was in, and I'm afraid that makes it very awkward." Miss Finner's voice was full of regret.

" Suddenly we swung round a corner with such a bump that it roused me, and I sat up and took notice. We were driving through a nice wide street, with trees

on each side, and good-sized houses set back in little gardens, all separate from each other. Each garden had two gates, and just room for a carriage to drive in and out. There wasn't a light to be seen in one of them, and I thought how early the people in those parts went to bye-bye. And then I caught sight of an open doorway, with the light shining from it out into the small yard or garden in front, and a street lamp standing exactly in front of it; so that between the two the place was well lit up. There was a carriage just driving out through the gate, and there were no shrubs or bushes in the garden, nothing but a little yard it was, I think, so I could see the two ladies standing in front of the door as plain as the nose on your face.

"I turned round when we'd passed and stared back at them, for the street wasn't crowded with people in gorgeous opera cloaks and blazing with diamonds, like one of these two was. I suppose it was Mrs. Vanderstein. She was standing a little to one side, as if she'd taken a step or two after the carriage, and was looking after it still. She had on a white dress, all sparkling, and a mauve or pink cloak thrown open and back on her shoulders, so I could see the jewels flashing and shining away all over her as right as rain, just like it says in the papers. There was a tiara on the top of her head as big as, as—" Seraphina gazed round searchingly for a simile—"as big as that chandelier. Oh, it can't have been anyone else! And besides, there was the other young lady; I didn't look at her so much, but I can swear she had a red cloak on. There now! As soon as I read about them I remembered what I'd seen on Monday night, and I said to my friend: 'My dear, I'm going out to keep an appointment with my photographer. Ta-ta.' I wasn't going to let on to her, of course. She's a bit of a cat, as a matter of fact."

Miss Finner stopped, fixing on Gimblet a gaze full of modest pride. But Gimblet sat, to all appearance, lost in thought. Though his eye met hers, it was with an abstracted look, and this in spite of the fact that Miss Finner's eyes were blue and darkly fringed. He could not fail to observe her curls of gold, the pink transparency of her cheek, the broad green and white stripes of her silken gown. He could not fail to hear, whenever she moved, the jingling of bracelets, of the many charms that were suspended from the chain around her white throat, and the merry peal of her laugh ; but all this seemed to be escaping his attention, and Miss Finner could detect nowhere the glances of admiration, which she considered the least that was due to her.

Instead, he had nothing but prosaic questions for her.

" What time do you say this was ? "

" After the theatre. Nearly midnight. I was late getting away."

" You don't know the name of the street ? Could you find your way to it again ? "

" Afraid not, it's not the way one generally goes. I've no idea where it was, beyond what I've told you."

" And the house ? Did you notice nothing about it to distinguish it from its neighbours ? "

" No, I didn't look at it specially. Yes, I did, though ; there was a board with ' To Let ' on it, up on the railings. The light from the lamp showed it very clearly."

" That's the only thing you can remember ? "

" Yes," said Seraphina.

" You said the door was open. Could you see anything of the inside of the house ? "

" No, or at least I didn't notice anything. There might have been some one standing in the hall. I don't know."

"Try and remember," urged Gimblet.

Miss Finner shut her eyes, contracted her brows, and gave herself up to reflection.

"No good," she remarked, after an interval in which one might have counted twenty.

"Did you notice the carriage which was driving away?"

"Can't say I did. It was a brougham, I think. I looked at the people on the pavement."

"Did you see lights in the house—in the windows, I mean?"

"No, I think the only light came from the door."

"Were you able to observe the expression on the ladies' faces?"

"Oh no, we went by too quick for anything of that sort. I didn't notice their faces at all, except that I believe they were both more or less young women."

"You can't think of anything else, however trivial?"

Miss Finner could not.

"If anything else comes back to me, I'll let you know," she said hopefully. "Don't you think you can find them from what I've told you?"

"I don't think there ought to be much difficulty in discovering the house, or at all events the street," said the detective, "thanks for your information, which may prove most valuable. You must allow me to present you with the reward offered in the papers."

After a slight show of protest she did allow him.

"Well, I must be off now," she said, after that formality was accomplished, and proceeded to gather her things together. "Thank you for the tea. But, I say, don't you want to know a little more of the beauteous stranger who is the bearer of the good tidings? You don't even know my name."

"Oh yes, Miss Finner, I do know it," Gimblet assured her. "You left a card in the hall; I saw it as

I came in, but I should of course be delighted to know more of you than that."

"Know then," said Seraphina, speaking in high, clear tones and with an assumption of affectation, "know then that I am not what I seem. My name, indeed, is a disguise, for my father, worthy man, was a Fynner with a y, an obscure relation of the noble house of Fynner of Loch Fyne. Though honest, he was poor; and my beloved and beautiful mother came of a line as well connected and impecunious as his own. The marriage aroused the wrath of both families, and the head of my father's house, proud and haughty earl that he was, would never be brought to acknowledge his unhappy cousins. I was educated in a convent, and, at the death of my parents, found myself at the age of sixteen alone, and without a penny in the world. Scorning to beg, I adopted the profession of the stage, chiefly with a view to supporting an aged and suffering relative, the aunt of my father's cousin. Now you know all there is to know about the innocent and unfortunate daughter of a gallant gentleman, the scion of a proud, but noble race."

Miss Finner tilted her nose skyward and drew herself up haughtily. Then, with a disconcerting suddenness, she winked at Gimblet, and burst into a peal of laughter.

"If you can't detect something fishy in that story," she cried, "you're not the detective you're cracked up to be! But I often say that piece about my family. A poor chap I used to know in my young days, when I was in the provinces, made it up for me. A poet, he called himself, and was always making up things; very pretty some of them were—if you like that sort of thing. It was him that thought of my name, and I've never regretted it really. But I never heard that he got anyone else to take any notice of his composings,

poor fellow." Miss Finner sighed and looked rather sadly out of the window. "He was a good sort," she added reminiscently; "one of the best. I put that bit in myself about being educated in a convent," she concluded, pulling at her gloves. "It's the usual thing."

With a white dog under one arm and a white cat under the other, Miss Seraphina Finner, of the Inanity, talked herself out into the hall, and, after an interval for the purpose of regaling Gimblet with an anecdote of her earlier struggles, finally talked herself through the door and out of the flat altogether.

Gimblet, returning to the little room and absently rearranging the displaced chairs and tables in their habitual order, found it more silent and lonely than before Seraphina had ever entered there, with her incessant chatter, her boisterous mirth, and her happy vulgarity. As he moved about the place, restoring to it the appearance of every-day tidiness, his mind was busy with the information she had brought and the question of his next move. He decided on it quickly as he was finishing his task, and only lingered to pull back the curtain and throw open the window, so that the odour of scent that Seraphina had bequeathed might have an opportunity of dispersing. This he did, and then taking his hat and a light overcoat, for the evening was chilly and the weather had turned afresh to rain, he went down to the street and hailed a taxi.

CHAPTER XV

"DRIVE to the Inanity," said the detective as he got into the cab; and when the man stopped before the theatre: "Do you know Carolina Road, North West?" he asked him, leaning out of the window to do so.

"Yes," the driver said. "The other side of Regent's Park, isn't it?"

"Then go there." Gimblet drew his head back and sat down as the man let in the clutch and the taxi started again. It was almost seven o'clock and the roads were comparatively clear of traffic, while the pavement seemed still more deserted, the few people who were to be seen walking quickly to get out of the rain; but it appeared that for the most part the world was within doors, resting after the day's work, or preparing for the entertainments of the evening.

The taxi went swiftly, and in a short time had drawn near to its destination. As they left the more fashionable streets behind and passed northward into semi-suburban districts, Gimblet leant eagerly forward, noting every characteristic of the neighbourhood with an observant eye and an expectant alertness.

They soon came upon tree-lined roadways, bordered by houses that boasted small plots of ground before their doors. Railings enclosed these plots, and in many cases a minute carriage drive circled from the pavement to the entrance of the house; but as they turned corner after corner and the same scene, with

slight variations, continually repeated itself, Gimblet's hopes gave way to an incredulous disappointment, for of all these dwellings not one answered to the description given by Miss Finner. She had mentioned particularly that the house he was looking for stood alone in its little garden ; but in all the streets traversed by the detective not so much as a cottage was to be seen of the kind known technically as " detached."

They turned at length into Carolina Road and the driver slowed up, looking round as he did so for instructions.

Again Gimblet's head went out of the window.

" Go back towards the theatre," he said, " but go another way," and after much noise and backing—for the street was a narrow one—the cab turned, and off they started again.

Rain was falling heavily by this time in a cold, persistent downpour. The wind blew chill from the west, and the detective, all a-shiver on this summer's evening, told himself, as he drew up the windward pane, that there must be icebergs sailing down the North Atlantic. He wrapped his coat closer around him, and hugged himself in a corner of the taxi. Again they splashed and bumped over the muddy, streaming macadam ; the water swished from the wheels ; the driver cowered under his shining waterproof screen ; and the car skidded unpleasantly as they swung round corners and narrowly avoided collision with other vehicles in the same plight.

Gimblet kept a look-out no less sharp than before, but with no better result. Here were houses, indeed, in plenty, here were gardens and carriage gates, and dripping trees ; but here was no single detached building of any shape or kind whatsoever. Another drive Gimblet took, following devious ways. He felt inclined to ring at Miss Finner's door and reproach

her with inaccuracy; but she had not told him the number in Carolina Road of the house she lived in. Besides, at this hour she would be at the theatre preparing to remove the apple which young Tell was undauntedly balancing.

For an unpleasant moment the detective wondered if she had merely made a mistake, or whether the whole tale were a fabrication. He remembered uneasily the readiness with which he had accepted it and his urgent pressing upon the voluble lady of the reward offered in the papers. No doubt she was laughing at his gullibility, and regaling her friends with an embellished account of how easily she had taken in the well-known detective. Gimblet's lips tightened as he thought of it. Was he becoming unduly credulous in his old age? There was the story Sidney had told him, too. He had assured himself that he had kept an open mind as to the truth of it, and had reserved his opinion till proofs were offered him; but, as a matter of fact, as he now acknowledged sardonically, he had believed every word spoken by the young man, and allowed himself to be absurdly influenced by an honest face and an appearance of frank trustfulness.

"A nice sort of detective you are!" said Gimblet to his reflection in the little slip of looking-glass that adorned the cab; and he cried to the driver to go back to Whitehall.

Higgs was waiting for him, and reported that he had taken a second advertisement to the advertising agents, and that he had also been to most of the principal taxi garages, where he had made inquiries and posted notices.

"The man is sure to turn up to-morrow morning, sir," he said.

In the morning there was no news. Gimblet telephoned to Grosvenor Street and was himself called up

by Sidney. To him he replied coldly that so far he had nothing to report. Directly after breakfast Sir Gregory arrived, panting. "I couldn't get you on the telephone," he said. "Have you heard nothing?"

"I had an answer to my advertisement," replied Gimblet, "but I am afraid the information brought me was quite unreliable."

He told Sir Gregory in a few words of Miss Finner's visit.

"I tested her story pretty severely yesterday," he said, "but there still remains a chance that the man who drove her may appear, and be able to remember the exact route by which he took her on Monday night. There is no doubt her own account is so inaccurate as to be worthless; and it is possible," he added, owning the secret dread he could not keep from his thoughts, "that she was only indulging in a kind of practical joke."

Sir Gregory was beginning to show the effect of his days of anxiety. Though his face was still pink, the lines on it seemed to have become deeper and more numerous, and he had the weary, listless air of one to whom sleep has denied herself. Gimblet was not anxious for his company, but Sir Gregory would not be shaken off. The detective said he had letters to write and business that must be attended to; but was met by a pleading request to be allowed to remain, in case the taxi driver should make his appearance.

"I don't know what to do with myself if I go away," said Sir Gregory miserably. "If I am here I feel that, if any news does come, I shan't have to wait longer than is necessary for it. Nothing like being at headquarters."

Finally Gimblet consented to his staying, and himself withdrew into another room with a bundle of papers that needed his attention. When he went back after

an hour's work to the library, where he had left Sir Gregory surrounded by newspapers and books, he found these cast aside or strewn on the floor and the baronet himself standing by the telephone, in the act of hanging up the receiver.

"I got tired of reading," he explained; "nothing of interest in the papers, or I can't take any interest in them, whichever it is; so I just thought I'd call up young Sidney, and tell him about the ladies having been seen by that young woman. Relieve his anxiety, poor chap, to have some one to talk about it to." On the incidental relief to his own feelings afforded by having a listener into whose ears to pour them, Sir Gregory did not think it necessary to expatiate.

Gimblet showed his vexation.

"Really, Sir Gregory, you might have known better than to put him on his guard in that way! Supposing there's anything in Chark's suspicions, don't you see that the more complete Sidney thinks our ignorance and mystification, the better? While, as soon as he knows us to be on the track, we lose any advantage we may have?"

"But—but you said you didn't suspect him!" stammered Sir Gregory, dumfounded.

"I didn't say so. I said there was no reason to take a tragic view or to suspect anyone at all at first. I certainly do not accuse anyone now. But day after day is passing, and the matter looks very much more serious with each succeeding hour. It seems impossible, if all were well, that the ladies should not have communicated with their friends before now. This is Thursday. They vanished on Monday. I have been anxious to spare you, Sir Gregory. I know you have been only too ready to imagine the worst, and I did not wish to add to your fears; but this is the third day without news, and it is impossible to

disguise any longer that you have grave reason for them."

Poor Sir Gregory's last hopes flickered and were extinguished.

"You think—you think——" he murmured.

"I think there is cause for grave anxiety, but that is not to say that I am without hope. Far from it. Still, it is necessary to act with caution; and it was most imprudent of you to tell Sidney that we had heard anything. It is true that what we have heard is probably a mare's nest, but in any case there is no need to go blurting things out like that."

Sir Gregory paid little attention to what Gimblet was saying. "So you do think Sidney may know more of this business than he admits," he repeated, half to himself. "Well, perhaps it was a pity I spoke to him just now, though I don't see what harm it can do either. The question is, what do you think he's done with her? Do you think"—Sir Gregory's voice seemed to fail him but he cleared his throat and continued with a gulp—"he's killed her?"

The words came with a rush, and the question was plainer than Gimblet cared to answer. "I don't think anything," he replied, still rather testily, "but I must consider everything and anything possible. At present it is all mere suspicion, but things look rather black, though not only against Sidney. As a matter of personal opinion I incline to the idea that that young man is innocent; still, I can't admit his character cleared on that account. I've no evidence worth mentioning one way or the other."

"Who else are you thinking of, when you say things look black against others than Sidney?" asked Sir Gregory eagerly. "I have thought myself, that, perhaps, the servants——"

"Mrs. Vanderstein's servants? I don't think they

can have anything to do with it. It would have been impossible for one of them to have got rid of the two ladies, while they were at home, without the knowledge of the others. And we can hardly contemplate the possibility of an organised conspiracy at present. The chauffeur and footman, you think, may have disposed of them by some means when they were supposed to be driving to the opera? But the chauffeur is an old and trusted servant, and, moreover, the box opener says that the ladies occupied their box. There is also the night watchman, who is an ex-corporal of the Foot-guards, and whose character is of the best. Suppose that, on their late return to the house, he let them in quietly, as it was his business to do, and then killed them both in order to possess himself of Mrs. Vanderstein's jewels. The difficulties that would then confront him before he could dispose of the bodies would be well nigh insurmountable, even if it were possible for him to silence two women simultaneously so effectively as to prevent anyone in the house from being aroused. The probabilities are strongly against the night watchman's having anything to do with it; and, indeed, I think all the servants may safely be left out of the reckoning."

"Then who can have harmed them?" Sir Gregory asked.

"I hesitate to mention anything more to you, Sir Gregory, after your recent injudicious conduct. However, I don't think you'd be able to warn the other person upon whom suspicion may fall. It is odd that it should not have occurred to our friend Chark that Sidney is not the only one who would benefit by Mrs. Vanderstein's death," said Gimblet.

"Why, what do you mean; who would benefit?"

"Surely you know. It was you that told me."

"I told you?" Sir Gregory looked the picture of

bewilderment. "I don't know anyone, except, of course, Miss Turner, who would be a penny the better if my dear friend should die."

"Exactly." Gimblet, his chin on his hand, gazed over Sir Gregory's head at his newly-discovered Teniers, which he had found time to hang up in a central position. "A little further to the right, and it would be still better," he thought.

But Sir Gregory was bounding in his chair. "Miss Turner! Impossible! A young girl, sir! You don't know what you are saying."

"I thought you disliked her." Gimblet was very calm, almost indifferent.

"That's a very different thing from thinking her capable . . . surely it's impossible. . . . What makes you suspect her?" Sir Gregory finished by asking, his curiosity getting the better of his incredulity.

"I don't say I suspect her," Gimblet answered patiently. "I say that suspicion might possibly fall on her more reasonably than on Mr. Sidney, with whom, by the way, I think she is in love."

"Really, how do you know that?"

"I have evidence that she sympathised very deeply with his troubles, and carried her sympathy to a length unusual in young ladies for men to whom they are not attached. I saw him last Sunday in the company of a girl, who I think must have been she. If it was, there is no doubt about the thing. Anyone could see it in her face at a glance."

"Still, if that were so, I don't see why she should injure Mrs. Vanderstein."

"Love is a very common prompter of crime. I don't say it is likely, but it is not impossible that this young woman, knowing Sidney to be in terrible straits for want of money, his career threatened, heaven knows what other threats on his tongue, should be prepared

to go to desperate lengths to procure him what he needs. You never can tell what they will do in such cases; and the one piece of real evidence that I have shows that she did not mean to sit by idle while her lover went to his ruin."

Gimblet took Barbara's telegraph form from his notebook, and spread it on the table before him. "Look at this," he said; and Sir Gregory got up and peered eagerly over his shoulder, eyeglasses on nose.

"Luck is coming your way at last expect to have good news by Wednesday removing all difficulties."

"There's no signature. Who is it from?" he asked.

"It is from Miss Turner. I was able to get this form from the post office and to compare it with a specimen of her handwriting," said Gimblet. "The absence of signature alone looks as if a good deal of intimacy exists between her and Sidney, though the name may possibly have been omitted accidentally."

"But what could she mean?"

"Her meaning is plain enough. She promises Sidney that the money he wants shall be forthcoming. I do not know how much he requires, but he told me that the sum is a large one. Now, how was she going to get a large sum by Wednesday?"

"She might raise something on the legacy from old Vanderstein, in which his widow has a life interest," suggested the baronet.

"I don't know the exact conditions of the will; but, supposing she dies before Mrs. Vanderstein, what happens?"

"I don't know," Sir Gregory confessed.

"If it reverts to Mrs. Vanderstein, there wouldn't be much security to borrow money on. In any case, there is little difference between the ages of the two

ladies, and rates would be very high. She might not be able to raise nearly enough, even if she could get any at all," said Gimblet.

"It would be too terrible if a girl like that so much as lifted a finger against one who has been the soul of kindness to her," Sir Gregory repeated.

"Ah, Sir Gregory, terrible indeed! But terrible things happen every day. Let a crisis arise, and you never know who may not surprise and horrify you by showing the cloven hoof. I hope that Miss Turner is entirely innocent of all knowledge of this affair, but there are two points which are against her."

"And what are they?"

"One is her parentage. I have been making inquiries about her father, and find that William Turner was a most unholy scoundrel, a man who would shrink at nothing to gain his ends, always escaping the penalties of the law by the skin of his teeth. He slipped from beneath the hand of justice over and over again, and finally bolted to South America, where he is reported to have died. Suppose that there was no truth in that rumour? Suppose he should in reality have returned to Europe, that he is even now in England, in London, his presence unknown to anyone but his daughter? With such a man to instigate her to crime, who can say what the girl might not venture? In any case she has bad blood in her; and there is much truth, Sir Gregory, in the old saying that 'blood will tell,' despite the socialistic opinions to the contrary which now prevail."

"True enough," murmured the baronet. He was leaning forward listening intently to Gimblet's every word. "But you said there were two points against her."

"Yes. The second is what may have prevented you from suspecting her before. It is the fact that she

appears to have been spirited away as well as Mrs. Vanderstein. Well, if there has been foul play—which heaven forbid, but we must consider all the possibilities now—if, I say, the vanishing of these ladies has its origin in crime, the disappearance of Miss Turner is the most suspicious part of the whole affair. For why in the world should she share with Mrs. Vanderstein the attentions of any hypothetical criminal? She had no diamonds to be robbed of; she did not go about covered with jewels, having none of any value to display. She could only be an additional danger, and one that no ordinary robber would willingly burden himself with, since her presence could be no possible source of profit.

"No, it seems clear that if Mrs. Vanderstein were to be decoyed away and murdered for her jewels it would be on an occasion when she was unattended by her companion. So far, Sir Gregory, you may take that as an encouragement to think that she is uninjured. It is indeed a most hopeful sign, and one of the reasons why I have refused, until to-day, to take a gloomy view of the business. Still, why has the girl disappeared? We are driven back on the supposition that she did so of her own free will; and, if that was the case, what was her purpose? Remember, all this is the merest theory, which it would be ridiculous to accept before we obtain further facts by which to test it. At present we have a very insufficient acquaintance with anything that does not involve these wild conjectures." As he finished speaking, Gimblet took out his watch and gazed at it long and significantly.

With a sigh, Sir Gregory was at last obliged to take the hint. It was luncheon time: the footsteps of Higgs as he journeyed between the kitchen and the dining-room; the clatter of the dishes as he placed them upon the table or sideboard; the delicious smell

of pie that was wafted in whenever the door was opened—all these proclaimed that the hour had sounded on the stroke of which it was Gimblet's custom to take his place before the dining table, full of the pleasantest anticipations. He was an eccentric gourmet, devising for himself meals in which strange dishes appeared in the menu, and he had an excellent cook, who was content to humour his taste and to labour secretly to prevent his poisoning himself altogether; so that, when he ordered fried oysters and Schwalbach *soufflé* for luncheon, or lobster and chocolate ice for dinner, she would intersperse what she considered more wholesome dishes, such as legs of mutton and rice puddings, among those he had chosen for himself, in the vain hope that they might tempt him from his dangerous combinations. He gave up remonstrating with her after a while, although he refused to be coerced into eating what he did not like, and his persistent neglect to partake of the rice puddings caused such distress in the kitchen that Higgs fell into the habit of removing a spoonful from them before he cleared them away, and consumed it himself rather than that the cook should what he called "take on."

To tell the truth, Sir Gregory was not without hope that Gimblet would have asked him to stay to lunch; but it was plain to the most sanguine that the detective had no such intention, and with hesitating reluctance the baronet was obliged to depart. He turned in the doorway, however, to say firmly: "I shall come back this afternoon," and then hurried away before Gimblet had time to put into words the objection his lips were struggling to form.

Sir Gregory walked to his club, and regaled himself on cold lamb and a glass of claret. He had no appetite, and soon pushed away his plate and wandered into the smoking-room, where he fidgeted about, disconsolate

and dejected. Several members whom he knew, aware of his friendship with the ladies whose mysterious disappearance was by now arousing general interest and, as a topic, shared the favour of the newspapers with the preparations for the Royal function that was to take place during the following week, came up to him and tried to get him to talk about it. But if they hoped to glean from him some grains of gossip beyond the reach of common knowledge, too scandalous possibly for a decorous press, wherewith they should proceed to acquire a libellous popularity among their acquaintances, these gentlemen were to know the leaden flavour of disappointment. Sir Gregory, with the sting of Gimblet's reproaches fresh in his mind, shut his mouth like a vice at any attempt to turn the conversation in the forbidden direction, and scowled as horribly at his friends as his naturally amiable cast of countenance rendered practicable; so that they soon moved off, telling each other that old Jones was becoming a cantankerous old fool and seemed likely to go off his head altogether, as far as they could judge.

It happened in this way that the baronet found himself more and more neglected and alone; till, after standing it for a couple of hours, he could at last bear no longer a state of things as disastrous to his nerves as it was wearing to his temper. About half-past four he put his pride in his pocket, and leaving the smoking-room caught up his hat and hastened from the building. Ten minutes later he was again ringing at Gimblet's door.

Scarcely had he been ushered into the detective's presence than the bell rang again, and Higgs came in to say that a taxi driver had arrived in answer to an advertisement, and asked to see Mr. Gimblet.

To Sir Gregory's despair Gimblet at once left him, and called the man into the little waiting-room.

"Good afternoon," he said to the taxi man, an intelligent looking fellow with a clean-shaven face, who returned his greeting civilly as he followed him into the room; "are you the man who drove a lady from the Inanity on Monday night to a house in Carolina Road?"

"That's me, sir," answered the man, "leastways, as you may say, I drove one of them there."

"What?" said Gimblet. "Was there more than one?"

"Yes, sir, there was two young ladies when I took them up, but only one of them went to Carolina Road."

"What happened to the other?"

"I took her to another address first, sir," said the driver; "I forget the exact number, but somewhere about half-way down Hilliard Street it was, and on the right hand side as I went. That's Maida Vale way, Hilliard Street is."

"And you went there first," cried the detective, "why then, of course I see it all now; the lady only told me she went from the theatre to Carolina Road, and my not knowing of the detour you made on the way has led me to some wrong conclusions."

"To Hilliard Street first. Those were the orders they give me," repeated the man.

"Yes, of course," said Gimblet. "Now, as you drove on from there to Carolina Road, do you by any chance remember seeing two ladies, very richly dressed, standing in front of the open door of a house, which had a small garden or yard between it and the street?"

"Now you're asking me a riddle," said the taxi man. "I may have seen two ladies, or again I may have seen a hundred of them, or I mayn't have seen none at all. That's more than I could tell you."

"You didn't happen to notice any particular two?"

" No, sir, I did not. If I was to go driving about the streets a-looking at all the pretty ladies I see about, I'd be troubling the insurance people a bit too often. I keep my eyes on what's in the roadway and that takes me all my time, I don't think."

" Quite so," said Gimblet. " Of course you are perfectly right not to look about you. Well now, perhaps you could tell me this. In going from Hilliard Street to Carolina Road, would you pass through a row of single detached houses on the way ? Houses all standing in their own gardens some little way apart from each other ? "

The man considered, mumbling to himself the names of the streets, as he made a mental journey along the route the detective indicated. In a minute he looked up.

" There's Scholefield Avenue," he suggested, " that's all little places like what you say."

" Did you go by it on Monday ? " asked Gimblet.

" I did, sir. It's about half-way. There isn't no other street on the road with the houses all separate like that, so far 's I can recollect. I've got me cab down at the door, sir ; why don't you jump in and let me take you along to see for yourself ? "

" I think that's exactly what I will do," said Gimblet. " You go down and I'll follow in a moment."

Gimblet was all eagerness. Here at last he seemed to be off on a definite scent, and he leapt to it all the more keenly for last night's check. The door had not closed upon the driver of the taxi before the detective had decided in his mind more than one question requiring an answer. First, he would take Higgs, secondly, he would not take Sir Gregory. He tiptoed along the passage, and noiselessly turned the handle of the pantry door.

" Higgs," he said, " I am going out to have a look

at a certain house. I may want you. Get ready to come. I give you three minutes."

As quietly, he repaired to his own bedroom, and going to a cupboard made a rapid selection of various small articles, which he stuffed in his pockets. Then, opening a drawer, he took out a Browning pistol, and that also was stowed away. He stood an instant in the middle of the room with his head on one side, tugging absently at his ear. Had he forgotten anything? Ah, he knew what it was, and springing back to a shelf he seized and added to his collection a box of chocolates. "One never knows when one will get back from these sort of jaunts," he said to himself, "and I have been very hungry before now on my hunting trips."

One more look round satisfied him that he had everything he could imaginably need, and he returned to the hall, where Higgs was waiting by the door.

A minute more and they would have got clear away, but at the very instant that Gimblet, hurrying quietly towards his servant, snatched at his hat and lifted it to his head, the library door opened, and Sir Gregory's pink and anxious countenance peered out on him.

"Mr. Gimblet," he cried, "where are you off to? The taxi man brought news then; and you would go without telling me! No, don't let me delay you," as Gimblet paused, hesitating, "I will come with you wherever you are going, and you shall tell me on the way," and grasping his hat and stick, the baronet prepared to accompany the others.

There was no help for it, and the detective surrendered at once. Indeed, the anxious face reproached him, and he knew he had been patently a little less willing to endure Sir Gregory's society than was, under the circumstances, altogether charitable. The poor man's distress, though it made him rather a depressing

companion, bore witness to the kindness of his heart and was if anything a circumstance entirely to his credit ; and the accident that he bored Gimblet ought not really to be allowed to prevent him from participating in the rescue of his friends, if rescue there were to be.

" Come along, Sir Gregory," said Gimblet.

CHAPTER XVI

SCHOLEFIELD AVENUE was a short street of moderate-sized houses, which, when they were built, had stood at the extreme margin of what was then a suburb; indeed, some of the original tenants had called it the country. There was considerable variety of appearance about them, but they were alike in one respect: each stood apart from its neighbours, in grounds that differed in extent from a tiny yard to half an acre. Thus No. 1, at the south-eastern corner, possessed a large kitchen garden running back a long way, with outbuildings at the further end, a stable, with a coach house on one side of the stable gate, and a chicken house and run on the other. The old lady who lived at No. 1 was very proud of the fact that she supplied herself with vegetables, eggs, and poultry all the year round, though, as she was fond of saying, her house was within three miles of the Marble Arch. She often thought of keeping a cow.

No. 3, next door, had hardly any garden behind it at all, the ground that should by rights have belonged to it having been bought up by No. 1 in former days and added to its own; and this caused an unneighbourly feeling to exist between the two houses, which was inherited by each successive occupier of No. 3. Most of the other dwellings in the street were more equally provided with land; and the row came to an end with No. 17, a very small house surrounded by nothing more interesting than an asphalt path, with a thin hedge of

laurel between it and the outer railings. Some of the houses showed the large, high window of a studio. On the opposite side of the road the same variety existed.

The taxi containing Gimblet, Sir Gregory, and Higgs drove slowly down the street, and was more than half-way along it when the detective caught sight of the board "To Let" for which he was looking. It adorned the railings of No. 6, which stood on the left hand side as they went north.

They stopped after they had turned the corner, and got out of the cab. Gimblet paid and dismissed it, and they walked back to No. 6.

It did not look very promising, presenting a shuttered and unbroken front to the spectator, and bearing marks of age and disrepair. The gate swung on a broken hinge, and, in the cold wind that was still blowing, a door at the back banged every now and then with uncontrolled and unprofitable violence.

Higgs, at a sign from Gimblet, rang the bell and stood aside, while they waited for some one to answer it. For a few minutes they heard nothing but the jar of the banging door and the rustle of the wind in the trees that lined the street; then they were aware of a slatternly woman, carrying a wooden bucket in her hand, who was trying to attract their attention from the steps of the house next door.

"If you gentleman are a-ringing," she began, addressing them in a shout over the intervening bushes, "a-thinking, as it might be, by so doing to get into that there house, it ain't no good; you can't do it. There ain't no one in it."

"Who's got the key?" Gimblet cried back to her.

"I've got it meself. I'll come round and unlock the door."

Descending the steps as she spoke she proceeded

to make her way into the street, and so in at the swinging gate of No. 6.

"'Ave you got a horder from the hagents?" she demanded when she arrived. "No? Well, I don't mind you having a look at the 'ouse all the same, if you're set on it. There ain't much to see, I reckon, but a lot of dirt and litter."

As she spoke she inserted the key in the lock, and opened the door. Sir Gregory, who was nearest, was about to enter, but Gimblet laid a hand upon his arm.

"Please, Sir Gregory, I must pass before you to-day," he said, and putting him gently on one side he stepped across the threshold. The woman was in the act of following, but he motioned her back, and stood for a moment staring at the floor. Then he turned to her.

"I see on the board that the house is to be let unfurnished, or would be sold," he said, "and I understand it has been empty a considerable time. Can you tell me how long it is since anyone has been to look at it?"

"It's stood hempty more'n two years," said the woman, "so I've 'eard say. There ain't been no one come to look at it since I've been 'ere. I'm caretaking, I am, for a party what live next door. 'E's away in foreign parts, that's where 'e is, and time I've been a-caretaking for 'im you're the first what's asked to see the hinside of this yere 'ouse."

"And how long have you been caretaking here, do you say?" Gimblet inquired.

"I've been 'ere a matter of four months come next Monday," replied the woman.

"Thanks," said Gimblet; and turned again towards the interior of the building. He bent down, and looked close at the bare boards of the passage, on which lay the dust and dirt that accumulates in an empty

house. Then as an idea struck him he stood upright again.

"I don't think we will bother to go over the house," he said to the woman. "I fear it wouldn't suit me. At all events, you can perhaps tell me one more thing I am anxious to know," he continued, coming out of the house and facing the street. "There was another board up in this street about a week ago, but I see they have taken it down. Do you know which number it was, and whether the house has been let?"

"Why yes, sir, they 'ave been and took down the board from No. 13," said the caretaker, "took it down beginning of the week, they did. But the 'ouse's let, I think; it won't be no good your going after it. If it's a furnished 'ouse you're looking for, I see a board hup in the next street t'other day. Little Cumberland Street."

"Thank you very much," said Gimblet. "I'll take a look at it if I find No. 13 is let. Good morning, and I'm sorry to have troubled you."

They left the woman to lock up the house and return to her caretaking, and started off up the street.

Sir Gregory went reluctantly, visibly hanging back.

"Look here," he said to Gimblet, "why don't you go over that house? It wouldn't take a minute. Supposing they've got her shut up in an empty room at the top somewhere. Much better make sure."

"My dear Sir Gregory, no one has been in that house for months; the dust was deep on the floor and there were no signs of its having been disturbed recently. Do you think two women in long evening dresses could go in without leaving some mark of their passage so short a time ago. Their dresses would either have swept away some of the dust or, if they held them high, their footmarks would have remained. It is impossible that No. 6 is the house, unless some one has spread fresh

dust in the hall since Monday. Besides, it is very improbable that they should have gone to such a deserted, filthy building, and, on the contrary, more than likely that they should go to a house that had just been let. I felt sure there must have been a board up at another house in this street when Miss Finner passed, as soon as I looked at the floor. Come, here is No. 13, and I have a feeling that we shall find it a more profitable hunting ground."

Gimblet opened, as he spoke, the gate of No. 13, and took a rapid scrutiny of its exterior as he walked quickly up the short distance that separated it from the road.

It showed a striking contrast to the forlorn and gloomy front offered to the world by the house they had just visited. No. 13 was spick and span; its white walls and shutters shone with the brightness of new paint; a neat grass plot, with a diminutive carriage drive winding in a half-circle round it, divided it from the railings of the street, the whole occupying no more than a few square yards of space. On each side of the flight of steps that led up to the front door there was a little triangular flower bed, gay with pansies, and, as the three men approached, the sun, breaking for the first time that day through the dilatory dispersal of the clouds, cast a shining beam about the place and was caught and reflected from the surface of the windows.

The change in the day was not without its effect even on Sir Gregory, and as he watched Higgs spring forward to ring the bell a new and sudden inrush of hope mounted to his heart.

"I have an excuse by which we may get into the house if they seem disinclined to admit us," Gimblet was murmuring in his ear. "Back me up in all I say, but leave the chief part of the talking to me."

They waited eagerly, with eyes fixed on the door and ears strained to catch the sound of footsteps; but minutes passed and no such sound greeted them. Higgs rang again; the loud pealing of the bell could be heard jingling itself to a standstill in the basement, and must surely be audible all over the house. Still no one came, and he tried the area with no better result. Leaving Higgs to continue his efforts, Gimblet backed across the little lawn, and looked up at the windows to see if he could detect any sign of life.

There were muslin curtains in the bedroom windows and he tried in vain to catch sight of a pair of eyes peeping from behind one of them; but not a movement was visible anywhere. The shutters of the drawing-room were closed, and the parapet of the broad balcony shut them out from a searching inspection, which was still further impeded by a wide wooden stand which took up most of the balcony, and extended its whole length. In it were planted flowers, tall daisies and geraniums, which appeared somewhat withered and neglected, and, with the closed shutters, contributed the only hint of disorder in the clean and cheerful aspect of the house.

The detective made his way round to the back. Here the ground fell away, and the basement appeared on the surface instead of below the level of the ground. Another and longer flight of iron steps led up to a door used, no doubt, to give access to the garden. There was no bell here, and the door, of which Gimblet tried the handle, was locked. Through the windows of the basement he could see into the kitchen, clean and orderly as the outside of the house, with white tiled walls and rows of shining stewpans. The table was bare, he noticed, and no fire burnt in the grate; on a summer's evening such as this it might well have been

allowed to go out. On the other side of the steps he looked into what must be the scullery, and beyond this was a larder ; over these was a small window into which he could not see, while above the kitchen a large one was hidden, like those of the drawing-room, by outside shutters. The back window of the first floor, however, and all the other windows at the back of the house were without shutters, and veiled only by curtains of white muslin.

Gimblet took a hasty survey of the garden. It was not large, extending back for some sixty or seventy yards from the house, but bright with flowers and green with lawn and leaf ; trees surrounded it on all sides, now golden in the rays of the descending sun ; and a high wall gave it privacy from an inquisitive world. Here again the beds were dappled with pansies ; here were pinks and poppies, daisies and tall larkspurs, with such other flowers as could be induced to derive nourishment from the unrefreshing showers of smuts, which was their daily portion. By the end wall was a hut, of which the door yielded to Gimblet's touch, and disclosed a mowing machine in one corner, some garden implements in another, and a potting bench with boxes of mould and some packets of seeds ; by the door were stacked a few red pots. Gimblet stood for a moment looking in, and then went back to the front of the house.

Here he found Sir Gregory engaged in conversation with an elderly man, whose velvet coat and the paint brush he carried stuck behind his ear suggested that he was an artist. He introduced himself as the detective came up.

" Mr. Gimblet, I think," said he ; " my name is Brampton. I live next door," and he waved his hand towards the south.

Gimblet ground his teeth as he realised that Sir

Gregory had given away his identity, but he replied civilly that it was indeed he.

"Although only a stay-at-home painter, I have heard of you," said the new-comer; "but of course I had no idea who was ringing, when I came round. My wife saw your friends at the door here, and suggested that I should come and tell you that she believes there is no one in the house. We heard that it was let, and the other day a man came and took down the board, but my wife says that no one has been seen to go in or leave the house for several days; she and the servants are of opinion that it is empty at the present moment, and that the new tenant has not yet arrived."

"Indeed," said Gimblet, "I am grateful for your information; but I have some reason to think that the new tenant took possession some time ago."

"It can hardly be very long," observed Brampton, "for the Mills, to whom it belongs, only went away last week."

"Really," said Gimblet, "you interest me. Who are the Mills? Do you know them at all?"

"Most certainly I do. They are great friends of ours, and their having to go away like this is a sad loss to us. Arthur Mill is the son of an old acquaintance of mine—a manufacturer of glass—and is employed in his father's business. His wife is a charming woman, and we are devoted to them both. It was only lately decided that he was to go abroad, to look after a branch of the business in Italy, and they had very little time to make arrangements about letting their house. They only left on Friday last, and it was a great surprise to us to hear on Monday that the house had been let."

"Did you hear who had taken it?" inquired Gimblet.

"I think I did hear the man's name, but I am afraid

I have forgotten it. My wife saw a charwoman going in on Monday morning whom she often employs herself, so she ran in here, as she told me, to ask her what she was doing, as the house had been all cleaned up on Friday and Saturday after the Mills left. The charwoman said she had been sent in by the house agents to see if anything remained to be put in order, as the new tenant, or so she understood, wanted to go in at once. That is all we heard; but as no one has been seen or heard about the place since that day it looks as if they had changed their minds."

"Thanks very much," said Gimblet. "If you could tell me the name of the agents I think my best plan is to go and try to get the key from them, as it seems impossible to rouse anyone here."

"Ennidge and Pring are the agents; in Sentinel Street, about ten minutes' walk from here. You'll have to be quick, or you won't catch them. They're sure to close at six."

"I will go now," said Gimblet, and he drew Higgs on one side. "Higgs," he said, "keep an eye on the front of the house, and if anyone comes out and you fail to detain him, follow him, leaving Sir Gregory to watch the house. In the meantime, let him watch the back. I shall be back soon if I can get a taxi."

He started off, Mr. Brampton accompanying him as far as his own door and pointing out the way to Sentinel Street. At the gate they glanced back at the shuttered first floor windows and the faded flowers on the balcony.

"Mrs. Mill would be terribly upset if she saw how her flowers are being neglected," said Mr. Brampton. "She is so very fond of her garden, and is always watering and attending to her plants. A man is to come once a week, on Saturday mornings, to look after the garden and mow the lawn, and I shall tell him to

insist on watering the balcony boxes. That's your way now, up the street and bear to the left. Ah, there's a taxi."

A cab had indeed that moment turned into the street, and Gimblet hailed it and drove rapidly to the offices of Messrs. Ennidge and Pring, house agents.

CHAPTER XVII

MR. ENNIDGE was a short, middle-aged man, with grey hair, and a mild, benignant eye, which gazed at you vaguely through gold-rimmed spectacles. Mr. Pring, his partner, tall, thin, nervous and excitable, was the very antithesis of him, and that is possibly why they got on so well together. While Mr. Pring was always able to display enthusiasm in regard to the properties he had to dispose of, to the people who were inquiring for houses, and was never at a loss when it was necessary to explain that what the intending client took for geese were really swans, he was apt to relapse into gloom when called upon to deal with would-be sellers, or those who had houses to let and were disappointed with the rent obtainable, or the failure of Ennidge and Pring to procure them a tenant at any price. He was then only too likely, if left to himself, to disclose his plain and truthful opinion as to their property. This was seldom productive of good results, for, as a rule, the transference of the property in question to the books of another agent followed these outbursts; and, Ennidge and Pring's business being a small one, they could not afford to lose customers.

It was in such cases, however, that Mr. Ennidge was seen at his best. It was he who, with friendly smile and hopeful, encouraging word, cheered the downhearted householder and sent him away with confidence restored, convinced once more that a tenant would

shortly be forthcoming to whom the absence of a bath-room, of a back door, of gas or hot water laid on, and the presence of blackened ceilings, wallpaper hanging in strips, and dirt-encrusted paint, would if anything prove a veritable inducement to clinch a bargain most satisfactory to the landlord.

Mr. Pring had already left the office when Gimblet arrived on the scene, and in another quarter of an hour he would have found it wholly deserted. He gave his card to the only clerk of the establishment, who took it in to the little inner room, where he was immediately received by the smiling Mr. Ennidge; and to him he quickly stated his business.

"There can be no possible objection to my giving you all the information in my power with regard to the gentleman who has taken 13 Scholefield Avenue," said the house agent, "and since you cannot get an answer at the house I will send down my clerk with the key to let you in and assist, if necessary, in explaining matters to the tenant, if he should be discovered to be there after all. A very eccentric gentleman, I fancy, and something of a recluse. I could not, of course, take it on myself to use the spare key, which the owner happens to have left with us, at the request of a less well-known and responsible person than yourself, if I may say so, Mr. Gimblet; but since the capture of the forgers at the Great Continental last year, your name, sir, has been in every one's mouth; and you will allow me to add that I am, although hitherto unknown, one of your most fervent admirers."

Thus was it ever Mr. Ennidge's pleasant way to oil the wheels of intercourse with his fellows.

"The name of the tenant of No. 13," he continued, "is Mr. West, Mr. Henry West. He has taken the house for a month with the option of taking it on for

a year or longer; and I fancy he must be a man of means, as the offer which he made appears to be an unusually high one—unnecessarily so, I may say, between you and me, Mr. Gimblet; but in the interests of our client, the owner of the lease, I need hardly tell you we did not quarrel with him on that account!"

"What aged man is he?" inquired Gimblet.

"I really can hardly tell you," replied Mr. Ennidge. "The fact is that I myself have not yet seen him. Both I and my partner happened to be out when Mr. West came to the office, and he made all the arrangements with our clerk. Perhaps you would like him to come in?"

"I should be glad to ask him a few questions," said Gimblet.

Mr. Ennidge put his head into the outer office.

"Tremmels," he called, with his hand on the door. "Just come in here a moment."

The clerk appeared, a white-faced young Londoner, showing very plainly the effects of an indoor life and long, hot hours spent upon an office stool; he moved languidly, as if every step were an exertion almost too great to repeat, and stood before Gimblet in a drooping attitude of fatigue.

"Mr. Gimblet wants to hear about the tenant of No. 13 Scholefield Avenue," Mr. Ennidge told him.

The clerk st aightened himself with a perceptible effort, and stared fixedly at Gimblet, who had long since become accustomed to the interest the mention of his name commonly aroused. No doubt this youth knew the detective by repute; but he had an expression of such wooden stupidity, and withal looked so terribly ill and exhausted, that Gimblet wondered if he would be able to extract much sense from him.

"It was you," he said, "who let the house to Mr. West?"

"Yes," said the clerk. "He came in one day last week."

"Friday," interposed Mr. Ennidge.

"Yes, he came in here last Friday morning, and said he'd been over No. 13 Scholefield Avenue, having seen the board 'To Let' in front of the house," replied the clerk. "The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Mill, had only gone away that morning, and Mr. West was shown over by a servant who had been left behind to clear up and follow by a later train. He told me he required a furnished house for a year. He said he was very fond of solitude; that he had lived in India all his life and didn't care to meet strangers, but wanted a house with a garden, where he could be private, so to speak. He said he thought Scholefield Avenue would suit him admirably, but that he wished to take it for a month first to see how he liked it, and to have the option of taking it on. I was uncertain whether Mr. Mill would be agreeable to such an arrangement, and suggested waiting till we could communicate with the owner, but he wouldn't hear of that; said he wished to go in immediately, and would take some other house he'd seen unless he could clinch the matter then and there. He made an offer of fifteen guineas a week for the first month, and eight for the rest of the year if he should decide to take it on. This is such a very high price for this part of London that I felt sure Mr. Ennidge or Mr. Pring, if they had been here, would not have let it escape, but would have hit the iron while it was hot, if you take my meaning; and as I was aware that Mr. Mill had left an absolute discretion to the firm with regard to letting the house, and that he was very anxious to do so as quickly as possible, I didn't hesitate any longer, but agreed to Mr. West's conditions.

"He said that he wished to have possession of the house from midday of Monday last; told me to get a

charwoman in on Monday morning, in case any cleaning up remained to be done, and that he wished me to meet him at the house on Monday for the purpose of going over the inventory. Then he took out a pocket book, which seemed to be stuffed full of bank notes, paid me thirty guineas, the rent for half the first month, and asked me to get the agreement for him to sign. I got him two agreement forms such as we use, as a rule, when letting furnished houses, and he signed them both and put one in his pocket."

"Perhaps Mr. Gimblet would like to glance at our copy," said Mr. Ennidge, diving into a drawer. "Here it is," and he handed a paper to the detective, who turned it over thoughtfully. There was nothing on it beyond the ordinary printed clauses setting forth the terms of the contract. At the end the tenant had signed his name, "Henry West," in large, sprawling characters, the strokes of which seemed a trifle uncertain, as if the hand that held the pen had not been absolutely steady. Below, in a neat business-like writing, was the clerk's signature: "A. W. Tremmels, for Messrs. Ennidge and Pring."

Gimblet put it in his pocket. "I may keep it for the present, I suppose?" he asked Mr. Ennidge, who looked rather as if he would have liked to object, but on the whole decided not to.

"Can you describe what Mr. West looked like?" Gimblet asked the clerk. "But perhaps you had better tell me that on the way to the house. Mr. Ennidge has promised to send you down with me. One thing, however, before we start: I should like to see the inventory, if I may."

"By all means," Mr. Ennidge replied. "Just get it, Tremmels, and the key too. You know where they are kept," and as the clerk went into the outer office he turned again to Gimblet.

"If you would like me to come myself?" he suggested.

"Oh no, thanks," Gimblet answered, "do not trouble to come. As the clerk is the only one who met Mr. West, I think he will really be more useful to me. I suppose he can stand a walk down to Scholefield Avenue? He looks dreadfully ill, poor chap; what's wrong with him? Consumptive?"

"He is ill, I'm afraid," said Mr. Ennidge regretfully, "but it will do him good to get a walk and a breath of fresh air. The hot weather we had last week was very trying; Tremmels certainly looks very bad since the heat. I have told him to take a holiday to-morrow," he added kindly, "a day in the country will be the best thing for him, and there is not very much to be done in the office at this time of the year. Business is very slack, Mr. Gimblet. I daresay, now, yours keeps your nose to the grindstone, at one season as much as another?"

"Well, yes," said Gimblet. "I'm afraid the criminal classes aren't very regular in their holiday-making. It's very inconsiderate of them, but I'm afraid they're a selfish lot."

The house agent's ever-present smile broadened, and at that moment young Tremmels made his reappearance with the inventory. In an instant Gimblet's keen nose had told him that with the clerk there now entered the room a pervading smell of brandy, and his quick eye noted a tinge of colour in the pale cheek of the young man, which had previously not been visible there. "O-ho," he said to himself, "so that's the trouble, is it?" Then, with a word of thanks to Mr. Ennidge, Gimblet led the way out into the street, and turned his steps towards Scholefield Avenue.

"Now then," he said to his companion as they hurried along, "about this Mr. West. What is he like?"

"He's an elderly, rather horsey-looking gentleman, and odd in his manner," said the clerk. "What I mean to say is, he has a very pleasant way of talking, and yet somehow he doesn't talk like an ordinary gentleman might. Seems rather fond of what I may term the habit of using bad language."

"What does he look like?"

"He isn't what you'dc all a tall man; not that I should call him short either; and thin, very thin. Don't know if I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly," said Gimblet patiently, "would you know him again?"

"Oh yes. He's a very uncommon sort to meet about. I'd know him anywhere. He's got a leather coloured face, which looks as if he'd been out in the sun more than a few weeks, and a funny little bit of a pointed beard on his chin. Tell you what he looks like," said Tremmels, with more show of animation than he had so far exhibited, "he looks more like an American than he does an Indian; and, come to think of it, he's got a nasty sort of voice, same as they have, but not very strong."

"Anything else you can remember about him?" Gimblet asked. He was listening with intense interest.

"Well, he has got a way of standing with his legs apart, and getting up on his tiptoes; and then down he lets himself go with a jerk, if I make myself plain. His wool is a bit grey and is commencing to get baldish on the top. He seems to dislike seeing strangers or making new acquaintances, as you may say. He gave me to understand that he's a scholar, and going in for reading and what not when he's settled in Scholefield Avenue; says his health's bad too, but I shouldn't wonder if it was more likely something else. More this sort of thing." The clerk made an upward movement with his right arm and hand, of

which, as Gimblet was walking on his other side, the significance was lost on him.

"I beg your pardon?" he inquired doubtfully.

"Granted," said Tremmels; "what I mean is, if you understand me, I shouldn't be surprised if anyone was to tell me that he takes a drop too much. Rather rosy about the beak, I thought, and when he left the office I watched him go down the street till he was nearly out of sight, when what should he do but nip across into the private bar of the *Lion and Crown*."

"Ah," said Gimblet, "I observed a certain shakiness in the signature of the lease." In his own mind he was thinking that it was more than probable that the clerk had accompanied Mr. West to the *Lion and Crown*. "Did you notice anything else?"

"I don't know that I did," said Tremmels thoughtfully. "He wore ordinary sort of clothes. Gent's lounge suit with a large check pattern, brown boots, and a very genteel diamond pin in the centre of his tie. Altogether quite the gentleman, and very civil-spoken and pleasant when not swearing. He told me that he wouldn't want any coals ordered in, as his cooking would be done chiefly on the gas stove with which the kitchen of No. 13 is fitted. There is every convenience, as you may say," concluded the clerk.

As Gimblet pondered over what he had heard, and reflected that the powers of observation that his companion showed were greater than he had given him credit for, they drew near to Scholefield Avenue and passed beneath its lines of branching plane trees to the gate of Mr. Mill's house. Higgs was at his post before it and reported that nothing had stirred during the detective's absence. Sir Gregory came from the back of the house in the company of Mr. Brampton, who had joined him there. The artist was plainly excited.

"Your friend tells me," he said, as he came up to Gimblet's side, "that you think that the two ladies of whose disappearance the papers are so full—Mrs. Vanderstein and her companion—came to this house on the night that they vanished. It will be the greatest favour if you will allow me to witness your methods of investigating this affair."

"By all means," said Gimblet ungraciously, "why shouldn't the whole street come? I think it is very probable that it will do so, since Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones appears to be perfectly incapable of keeping his own counsel, no matter whether the safety of his friends is endangered or not." So saying he turned and held out his hand for the key of the house to the clerk, who, panting and gasping after his walk, now leant against the door as if no longer able to support himself unaided.

Sir Gregory and the artist, off whom Gimblet's right and left shots had glanced with a sting but produced no permanent wounds, fell back silenced for the moment, though unflinchingly determined to see anything there was to be seen. The quick, searching eyes of Brampton rested on the clerk, and he took in his woeful condition with the rapidity of his trade.

"That young fellow ought to be in bed," he said, in a low voice, in Sir Gregory's ear, "but I suppose, like the rest of us, he won't be able to tear himself away from this exciting spot."

They followed Gimblet, who had opened the door and passed through it into the hall. He looked round him in despair.

"Really, gentleman," he cried, "you must stay at the door for the present. If this house has anything to tell, it will never do so after you have trampled all traces from the very floors with your innumerable feet. I will just see if there is anyone here; and, if not, you

can come in after I have begun my thorough examination, as long as you keep out of my way and do as I tell you. Otherwise I warn you, Sir Gregory, that you will ruin every chance of success."

"He talks as if we were centipedes," murmured Brampton.

Sir Gregory motioned him to silence, and they remained obediently in the doorway while the detective and Higgs ran over the house, opening all the doors and glancing into the rooms to see if there were anyone in them. Whatever secret might lurk beneath that roof, for the moment at least there was no visible human occupant to divulge it; and, if he was to arrive at any answer to the problem of what had taken place on Monday night after the arrival of the ladies, it was clear to Gimblet that he must do so with no help other than the dumb aid he might receive from the inanimate objects still within the walls, or even from the very walls themselves.

As soon as he had completed the first hurried general survey, the detective began a systematic examination of the house, starting with the hall and passage of the ground floor. The other men had to move away from the steps while he was here, as their figures crowding in the open doorway blocked the light, and he wanted all he could get. There was no electric light. In Scholefield Avenue, Brampton told Sir Gregory, all the houses were dependent on gas for their illumination. Gimblet knelt down and examined the carpet of the hall on his hands and knees. He took a small magnifying lens from his pocket, and applied it to certain spots, which he lingered over longer than the rest of the floor; at the foot of the stairs he picked up a small object from under the corner of the mat; he held it to the light for a moment between finger and thumb, and then put it carefully away in a little box

like a pill-box, which he also produced from his pocket. Then he stood up, and examined the furniture with the same patient deliberation. Presently he spoke to the clerk, who was standing before the door, a little apart from the others.

"Have you got that inventory?" he asked. "Just read out the contents of the hall."

Tremmels came up the steps and opened the book he carried.

"Two oak chairs, one oak table, one mirror, one mat," he read. "One umbrella stand; two chairs on landing, eight engravings in frames."

"Wait a bit," interposed the detective, "we haven't got there yet."

He went to the door, and called to Sir Gregory and Brampton.

"I've finished the hall," he said. "If you want to come in, you can, as long as you stay behind me and don't bother me with talking."

Then he turned back to his search, and began to subject each tread of the staircase to the same minute examination as the hall had received. From time to time he added another tiny object to the one he had already placed in the pill-box; four or five were deposited there before they reached the first floor.

In this way the party ascended, a step at a time, till Brampton's curiosity began to succumb to the boredom of such ineffably slow, crawling, snail-like progress.

"I think I'll not inflict my presence any longer, Mr. Gimblet," said he, "it is time I dressed for dinner, or my wife will have to wait for me."

Receiving no answer from Gimblet, who was now absolutely absorbed in his work, he whispered to Sir Gregory that he would come back after dinner, and retired from the scene, escorted to the door by Higgs,

who let him out and shut it behind him before he returned to his post at the foot of the staircase.

At the top of the house Gimblet straightened himself and turned to Sir Gregory and the clerk, who were on the stairs a few steps below him.

Sir Gregory, who was nearly choking with pent-up questions, seized the opportunity.

"Have you found anything?" he cried, and Tremmels, though he said nothing, was a living echo of the words, as he strained forward behind Sir Gregory to catch the reply.

"Nothing definite as yet," said Gimblet, "but I may say it appears to me probable that, if Mrs. Vanderstein did come here on Monday night, she did not stay in the house long. I should say she went no higher, at all events, than the drawing-room floor." And he proceeded to the examination of the rooms working his way downwards.

The bedrooms yielded no harvest; they wore the dismal look of unoccupied rooms and had apparently not been entered since, having been swept and cleaned with great thoroughness, they had been left ready for the use of the tenant. None of the beds were made, there was no water in the jugs, there was absolutely no indication of so much as one of them having been used since the departure of Mr. and Mrs. Mill. Gimblet did not spend so long over them as he had over the staircase, but it was past eight o'clock when at length he came out of the last one and descended to the first floor.

"I can always try upstairs again if there is nothing conclusive here," he said to Sir Gregory, as they went down.

With his hand on the knob of the drawing-room door he paused an instant, looking with more sympathy than he had lately shown at the anxious face of the old

soldier. A feeling crept over him that it would not be good for Sir Gregory to enter this room ; it was a vague impalpable feeling, which he could not explain ; and in a moment it had passed. He opened the door and went into the drawing-room, leaving the baronet, in obedience to instructions received, faithfully standing on the landing, the white face of the clerk showing over his shoulder, framed in the square of the doorway against the dusky shadows beyond.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN the preliminary hasty search over the house, it had fallen to Higgs to reach the first floor earlier than his master. Gimblet had left it to him to examine, while he himself hurried to the upper stories; so that he now entered the drawing-room for the first time.

He stood for a moment turning his head to right and left, taking in the principal features of the apartment with quick, comprehensive glances. Then, of a sudden, the whole figure of the man stiffened; and it was hard to recognise Mr. Gimblet, the dilettante, the frequenter of curiosity shops, the lounger in picture galleries, in the tense, motionless form of Gimblet, the detective, at this moment. He stood, as a pointer stands when it catches the wind of game, erect and stiff, in an attitude of interrupted movement, one knee still bent for the step he had been in the very act of making; his whole form absolutely still, save for a series of short, successive intakings of the breath, as, with head thrown back and his eyes shining with the keen, well-balanced excitement of the hunter, he sniffed the air.

What was it he smelt? Something so faint, so indefinite, that after the first arresting instant he had lost it altogether; and with it the knowledge of what it was—which in that one second had seemed almost his—slipped away and was gone, nor could his most

strenuous effort recall it. Oh, for one more whiff of that evasive, troubling odour! But sniff as he might he could no longer detect anything, and slowly his attitude relaxed, and he brought other senses to bear upon the scene.

The room was divided, by its shape, into a front and back drawing-room, as is commonly the case in London houses; but the two had been thrown into one and the door led into the narrower back part, so that the light from the window overlooking the garden, which was obscured by trees, while it still illumined all that lay on Gimblet's right, hardly penetrated into the front and larger portion of the place. There the closed shutters of the three windows leading to the balcony prevented the light from finding an entrance, and it was very dark. The detective lit the gas and looked around him.

It was a cheerful, pleasant room; not overcrowded with furniture, and showing taste and judgment in its arrangement and decoration, though there was nothing very original about it. On the walls, which were covered with some light coloured paper, were hung three or four good modern pictures; the mantelpiece was an eighteenth century one, and on either side of it was placed a Chippendale cabinet, with shelves for china, of which some good pieces could be seen through the small panes of the glass doors. At the opposite end of the room was a long, low bookcase and, except for a large writing bureau, the rest of the furniture consisted of sofas and chairs, with one or two small tables. It was a room at once dainty and desolate, gay and forlorn. The empty flower vases which stood on the tables, the absence of stray books, work, papers, or other signs of human occupancy, gave it a look of discomfort and dreariness; but it was plain, from the bright chintzes and curtains and the soft luxury of the

carpet, that it only needed the presence of its owners to assume a cheerful and lively aspect.

Gimblet began his examination in his usual methodical manner, working his way over the floor on hands and knees, gazing at the carpet through his lens at any place where there appeared a doubtful mark or change in the appearance of its surface from that of the surrounding parts. As he came to chairs or tables he moved them to one side, and continued his quest on the spot where they had stood. There were two small Chesterfield sofas, one of which jutted out at right angles to the fire-place before the right hand window of the front part of the room, the other facing the door with its back against the wall.

When the detective came to the sofa by the fire-place, he pushed it to one side as he had pushed each piece of furniture in its turn, and as his eyes fell on the floor beneath it a low whistle escaped him : there was a patch of reddish stain on the green Wilton carpet, about three inches in diameter, and a smaller spot or two near by of the same rusty colour.

With his head on one side, and his lips still pursed as if to emit a whistling sound, but with no audible noise issuing from them, Gimblet gazed at the stain on the carpet ; and the longer he looked the sterner his face became ; the whistling expression vanished, and he opened and shut his mouth with a grinding sound as the teeth met. He rubbed his finger over the marks, and the patch seemed to crumble away at his touch, till a hole appeared in the carpet and the white boards of the flooring were exposed to view. He applied his lens to the edges of the hole and plucked at the frayed wool with his fingers. A small piece that he pulled off he bestowed in one of the little specimen boxes with which he had provided himself.

Then he replaced the sofa in its original position, and

continued his examination of the floor. Under the fender he discovered another of the little objects he had picked up on the stairs, but nothing else did he find of any interest till he began to turn his attention to the furniture. Almost the first thing he looked at was the sofa that concealed the hole in the carpet ; he was drawn back to it with an irresistible attraction. A careful scrutiny, however, did not reveal much more than the fact that the chintz cover was rather tumbled. Gimblet dug his hand down at the back of the seat, and pulled out the part of it which was tucked down. As he did so he felt a little lump under his fingers, and holding it up saw that it was yet another tiny shining thing for his pill-box collection, and as he looked at the piece of chintz he had pulled out he perceived several more of the same kind.

They glittered in the gaslight like little diamonds, but had evidently come off the spangled tulle of a lady's dress. Gimblet remembered that Mrs. Vanderstein's dress had been described by her maid as "*diamantée*" ; but then it was possible, indeed probable, that Mrs. Mill, or her friends, possessed gowns of similar material. Gimblet stooped again, and tugged up the rest of the sofa covering from the depths behind the cushions. This time he pulled it all up ; the whole covering lay spread before him in an untidy, unwieldy mass, and from the end, as he plucked it out, there shot two small objects, which fell to the floor at his feet. In a moment he had lifted them from the ground and stood staring at them : they were a piece of crushed and folded paper and a minute powder puff.

The detective unfolded the paper, and held it to the light ; it was a sheet of thick white notepaper, and on it was embossed a crown and device in heavy gold lettering. Below these was written in a fine, slanting foreign hand

"Most adored, I count the hours, the minutes, till I shall hear for the first time the sound of your voice. Heaven be praised that I have not long to wait, and you, whom heaven has sent to me, accept the thanks of my grateful heart. I send this by Madame Q."

The signature that followed made Gimblet open his eyes. "Felipe," in conjunction with the crown at the head of the paper and the foreign character of the penmanship, could refer to one person only. Gimblet was well aware that the Prince of Targona was honouring London with his presence. He glanced carefully round the room to make sure no one was near, folded the paper carefully, and placed it in his notebook. Then he turned his attention to the powder puff.

It was an ordinary little powder puff of pink silk and white down—very small, very dainty, if very commonplace. Gimblet turned it over and over, but could see nothing about it which stamped it as different from other powder puffs. Not that it was a curio in the peculiarities of which he was very well versed; he could not help realising that in the matter of powder puffs his education had been neglected. A French detective, he told himself sadly, would have read a whole history in this soft toy. He brushed it across the back of his hand, but it left no mark; he shook it into the palm, but no powder fell from it. It was plain to him that, whatever uses it might have served in the white hands that had formerly clasped it, it was not of any use at all in his, and in his irritation he was inclined to hurl it from him. But his methodical habits prevailed and he felt in his coat for a box to contain it. And suddenly, with what seemed like an involuntary movement, he lifted the hand that held the powder puff, and held it to his nose.

"Ah," he sighed, and it was a sigh of deep content.

Then he stored away the precious fluffy thing, and put it in his pocket. He finished the tour of the furniture without further discovery ; at the end of it he requested Tremmels to read out the contents of the room from the inventory, as he had done at the conclusion of his visits to each room or landing, checking off each object as the clerk read out its description.

" I am in hopes," he said to Sir Gregory, " of finding something not mentioned in the inventory, which we might take to be the property of Mr. West. But so far there is nothing that can possibly be his, not so much as a toothbrush. He certainly seems to be a leader of the simple life." Then he turned to Tremmels again. " Is there no mention of the chair covers ? " he asked. But the young man only stared at him open-mouthed, and he seized the book from his hand.

" Let me see," he murmured, running a finger down the page. " Here we are. ' Two Chesterfield sofas and five arm-chairs with loose chintz covers.' Might mean anything. Look here ! " he turned to the clerk again, " you went over the inventory. What do you remember about that sofa ? " He pointed to the one opposite the door, which, unlike the other sofas and chairs, had no chintz covering. Tremmels was flurried by the detective's sharp tone.

" I—I don't remember anything at all," he stammered.

" What, don't you remember that it had a cover ? "

Gimblet's second question was still more sharply spoken. The clerk shot a glance at him in which suspicion, timidity, and bewilderment were oddly mixed, and he answered stubbornly, repeating his former words as if he imagined a trap were being laid for him.

" I don't remember anything about it." His pale face wore an expression more wooden than ever.

The detective turned from him with an impatient movement, and stood looking down at the sofa with a frown on his face. It was exactly the same as the one in the front part of the room, but, instead of a cover of pink and white chintz, it displayed only the upholstery with which it had been originally covered by the makers : a kind of white tapestry with grey flowers and flecks of red, in general colouring not unlike the chintz on the other sofas and chairs, but tightly fitting and leaving exposed the bare legs of brown varnished wood, which were of a particularly ugly shape.

" Come," said Gimblet at last, " I must go downstairs."

" What did you find ? " Sir Gregory asked him anxiously as they went down, followed at a distance by the clerk, " what did you find by the other sofa ? "

The detective hesitated an instant.

" Sir Gregory," he said, " there is something here, some story to be read, if I can read it. The walls are trying to speak to me, I believe, if I could only listen rightly. There are things very plain that I can see, but not enough of them, and there is something that I don't understand. But what I have seen points to sinister things, and I must warn you that I don't like the look of them."

" Mr. Gimblet ! " cried Sir Gregory. " What do you mean ? "

" Yes, Sir Gregory," said the detective. " I am very much more—uneasy about your friend than I have yet been. I fear that, when I am in a position to give you news of her, it may be very bad. You may have to stand a shock. Don't you think it would be best if you went home and waited till I came to you ? "

But, though on Sir Gregory's face there crept a look of terrified grief, he would not go.

The dining-room told nothing, Gimblet's researches

there were vain, and he soon adjourned to the room behind it, which seemed to be a library or smoking-room. The shutters, as they had seen from the garden, were fastened, but by this time the last of the long summer twilight was fading and the night promised to fall dark and windy. Gimblet's first act was to light the gas.

It was a small room, this back room, where, no doubt, Mr. Mill, when he was at home, was accustomed to smoke his pipe and attend to his correspondence. Two of the walls were lined with bookshelves ; one side was taken up by the window ; and on the fourth, opposite the door and above the fire-place, were hung a quantity of mezzotints framed in sombre black. They surrounded a small oil painting that filled the place of honour immediately over the chimney piece, and which caught Gimblet's interested eye directly. It appeared to be an example of the early Dutch school, and he was seized with the desire to examine it more closely. The fire-place below it was lined with old blue and white tiles, and at these too he cast an envious glance, but the feelings of the collector were subservient just now to those of the detective, and he turned to the more everyday furniture of the room.

There was not very much in it : a couple of arm-chairs stood one on each side of the fire-place, and before the window was a large writing table with inkstand and blotting book disposed upon it, together with a few odds and ends. Even with these the table looked empty ; one missed the papers that by rights should have been scattered there. As Gimblet stood beside it, he was conscious of the cold draught that whistled by his ear, and it was then that he first looked toward the window.

" It must be open," he said to himself, and then, as he looked closer : " By Jingo ! "

It was a sash window of the old-fashioned kind, with a dozen or so wood-framed panes to each half of it, and the usual metal catch holding the top and bottom in position together when the window was shut. It was shut now, and the cold air that pervaded the place entered through cracks in the shutters, and after that encountered no further obstacle, for the top middle pane of the lower sash was destitute of glass.

Gimblet pushed away the table and examined the empty framework carefully, touching the edges with an incautious finger, which, however, he withdrew rather hurriedly and transferred to his mouth. He looked at the floor; and then, following his usual custom, knelt down on it, lens in hand. The gaslight was obscured by the shadow of the writing table, and he had recourse to the aid of a pocket electric torch. He was satisfied with what he saw, apparently, for he soon rose and turned to the window again. He unfastened the catch, and placing one hand on the framework sought to raise the sash, but it stuck stiffly, and both hands and a good deal of strength had to be exerted before he was able to lift it.

Then he flashed the light of the little torch on the window sill, and took from it a splinter of broken glass. After this he pursued his inspection of the room and its contents. There was, as has been said, little enough in it except books, but everything there was came in for the usual close scrutiny; the waste paper basket was not forgotten, nor were the empty grate and coal scuttle. In the end, after comparing the things mentioned in the inventory with those in the room, Gimblet shut the door into the hall, and ran his lens hastily over its woodwork. Apparently he saw on it more than he expected, for he returned more slowly to the task and spent several minutes examining some

small spots of dirt, which were visible to the naked eye on the white paint.

At last he had done, and there only remained the basement to be investigated. This took some time, and the results disappointed him, with the exception of a cupboard under the stairs where he discovered a housemaid's dustpan full of pieces of broken glass. He seized on it with eager excitement, and examined the surface of the tin very carefully with his lens ; only to put it down again with an irritated clicking of the tongue.

Sir Gregory watched these proceedings in a stricken silence ; his hopes had turned to lead at the words Gimblet had addressed to him on leaving the drawing-room ; as each successive door was thrown open he felt a tightening of the heart and a sick fear of being confronted with some terrible sight. Now he would almost have preferred that the detective should find no clue, so much he dreaded the solution to which he instinctively felt that these small discoveries were irresistibly leading.

The face of the clerk, who equally shared the rôle of silent onlooker, wore an expression of excited interest, except when he was addressed, when it relaxed into its usual wooden apathy. At other times he peered over Sir Gregory's shoulder with feverish, straining eyes, evidently possessed by all the passion for sensation in any form which is common to his class ; though, that he was as much in the dark as Sir Gregory, with regard to the conclusions suggested to the detective by the various objects he examined, was clear from the look of something like elation with which he watched the minute attention bestowed upon the unprofitable dustpan.

Gimblet returned this article to its place, and drew out, one by one, the other things in the cupboard :

a water-can, a bucket, a scrubbing brush, and other odds and ends. The last thing he brought to light was a crumpled ball of newspaper, stuffed away at the back of some brooms and pails. This did not look interesting; and, while Sir Gregory saw with relief the handling of anything which gave him breathing space, Tremmel's face fell.

Gimblet, however, was too methodical to ignore anything, even so unpromising an object as an old newspaper. He opened it out on the floor of the passage, unrolling the crumpled pages and spreading them flat on the boards. In the middle of the ball was a small quantity of dust, or rather what looked more like earth. Gimblet scooped it up in one hand and let it fall through his fingers into the palm of the other; it was black and fine, but gritty to the touch. With a puzzled expression he stowed some of it away in one of his little boxes, and put the rest in his pocket, wrapped in a piece of the newspaper. Then he disappeared into the coal cellar, which was the only place left that he had not visited. He found nothing there.

By this time it was nearly ten o'clock.

They went back into the hall and Gimblet opened the door of the little library.

"Sit down in here, Sir Gregory," he said, "you have been on your feet for hours"—and indeed the baronet was dropping with fatigue—. "I am just going out into the garden, and you may as well rest a little. As for you," he added to Tremmels, "you can go home if you like. I've done with the inventory."

"There's the key," the clerk reminded him, "and, if you don't mind my sitting down here in the hall for a few minutes before I go . . . I'm feeling a bit tired myself, sir."

He certainly looked it, but then he had looked so ill

from the beginning that the effect of these hours of standing about and the lack of food, which told heavily upon Sir Gregory, hardly added to the miserable aspect of Tremmels, whatever he might be feeling.

Gimblet told him to sit down, and leaving them went out into the garden. He walked round to the back, and along the path which led to the toolshed. Going into it he hunted, by the light of his torch, among the implements that leant against the wall; but what he sought was not there, and he retreated, unsatisfied. As he returned slowly to the house, he moved his lamp from side to side, so that the light shone on the flower beds between which he walked and not on the path beneath his feet; it was as if he hoped to find what he wanted among the flowers.

Turning the corner of the wall, he saw a dark figure in the act of shutting the further gate; it came towards him and he recognised the artist, Brampton

"You work late, Mr. Gimblet," he said, as he met the detective. "Any discoveries?"

Gimblet did not reply; he was looking at his watch.

"It *is* late," he said after a pause; and then half to himself, "late! too late, and too dark," he murmured; and again, "perhaps it is just as well. It will do Sir Gregory no harm to wait till to-morrow for bad news."

"What," said Brampton, "you have bad news for him?"

"I fear there will be bad news—to-morrow," said Gimblet.

The night was very dark, for clouds had gathered afresh, and the wind was getting up again. The leaves of the trees in the street rustled loudly as if in protest; from a distance the tinkle of a barrel organ sounded fitfully in the intervals between gusts of wind.

"It's as cold as winter," grumbled Brampton.

Gimblet was staring up at the front of the house, and when he spoke Brampton was struck by the change in his voice.

"Of course!" he cried, "the crumpled newspaper! What have I been about? Now, ah, now I know! Mr. Brampton," he said, moving, so that he faced the other in the darkness, "there is something very terrible here; something to be done that is quite unfit for Sir Gregory to take part in. I am only too well convinced that a crime has been committed in this house, a gruesome and dastardly crime, which but for the merest accident might not have been discovered for weeks. No ordinary criminals have been at work here; we have to deal with some scoundrel so cold-blooded and resourceful, so prudent, and so full of forethought and vile cunning, as I do not think I have ever encountered before. What is your nerve like, Mr Brampton? I see you are muscularly a strong man, and I shall have need of help. What do you say? Can you give me the assistance I want, or shall I go and find the policeman on this beat?"

The solemn words of the detective, and still more acutely the grave and urgent note in his voice, thrilled the imagination of the artist, and awoke in him a horrified perception of the seriousness of the situation, which hitherto he had looked on with an eye, half amused, half derisive, as we may contemplate a game of Red Indians played by some earnest and dramatic children. The spirit of adventure cried aloud in him, and overcame the shrinking of a refined nature from contact with the horrible.

"You can rely on me," was all he said, and thereupon Gimblet ran up to the door, calling to Higgs to open it.

The other men were sitting as he had left them, Sir

Gregory in an arm-chair by the library fire-place, and the clerk in the hall; both drooped in attitudes of extreme weariness.

"Will you please stay where you are a little longer?" Gimblet said to Sir Gregory. "I am going upstairs with Mr. Brampton, to see if he can tell me one or two things I want to know about the ordinary disposal of the furniture; and after that we will go home, unless you will be guided by me and do so at once. No? Well, we shall not be long. We shall not want you," he added to Tremmels, who was struggling stiffly to rise from his seat.

At Gimblet's words he sank back again, and leant his head weakly against the wall.

With a sign to Higgs and Brampton to follow him, Gimblet went upstairs.

The gas was still burning in the drawing-room, and the door stood open as he had left it. Gimblet paused on the threshold and drew Brampton's attention to the sofa opposite.

"Do you remember," he asked, "whether that sofa had a cover like the other before Mr. Mill went away?"

Brampton looked at it doubtfully.

"I can't say I do really," he said. "I ought to know, of course, but I don't feel quite sure. You see, the colouring is so much like that of the chintzes. One might never notice it. Still, the legs are very ugly; I think I should have observed them. And it is not like Mrs. Mill to leave an ugly thing so plainly displayed. But on the whole I'm not certain about it."

"Don't you feel," said Gimblet, "that there is something terrible, something fearful, in those shining brown pieces of wood? Their ugliness should be decently covered. Unfortunately, I am afraid I know where to look for their covering."

He led the way to one of the French windows of the

front room and threw it open. Unfastening the shutters, which still barred the way, he flung them back and went out on to the balcony, followed by the two men.

It was, as he had seen from the ground, an unusually broad one, and extended across the whole width of the house. A low wall about nine inches high ran round its edge, supporting a balustrade of stone. A large green painted wooden box, or trough, about ten feet long by a yard wide, and as tall as the balustrade, was planted with flowers, which did not appear to be in a very flourishing condition.

By the light of the street lamp they could see that the geraniums' petals were turning black, and that the marguerites hung their heads on stalks from which all vigour seemed to have departed. Within the balustrade the black shadows lay like a pool of ink, and the floor of the balcony was quite invisible, except where the open window through which they had stepped let out a narrow stream of light.

"Open the shutters of the other windows," Gimblet said to Higgs.

When this was done they could see better. To Brampton's amazement Gimblet's next act was to grasp one of the geraniums and pull it up by the roots; a daisy followed, and in a few minutes he had torn up every plant. Brampton, as he stood watching, noticed how easily they came up.

Then Gimblet called to him.

"Now, Mr. Brampton, if you and Higgs will take that end of the box, I can manage this one. I want to tilt it up a little."

It needed all the efforts of the three men to move the box, full to the brim of soil as it was. Panting and heaving, they shifted it first away from the balustrade, and tilted it towards the wall of the house. The earth

poured out as the angle increased, and in a minute the floor was deep in it.

"Gently, gently," said Gimblet. "Look, what is that?" and he pointed to something white, which was poking out through the earth in the box.

His electric torch flashed upon it, and the others, balancing the tilted flower box on its edge, peered in, and saw that it was a bit of pink and white chintz.

It seemed a long while before Gimblet spoke. He stood as if turned to stone, and Brampton felt an indefinable horror stealing over him, a dread of he knew not what, but which he seemed to be conscious was in some way a reflection or telepathic transference of the other's unspoken thoughts.

At last with an obvious effort Gimblet straightened himself.

"We must tilt out a little more earth," he said in a low tone, "very carefully now."

Very cautiously they raised the side of the stand again, and a rush of soil poured over the edge; the little patch of white they had seen in a corner became a large piece, and almostly instantly it was plain to them all that the greater part of the box was full of it. Leaving the others to manage the box, which was now easily steadied, Gimblet ran round and knelt at its side, scooping out handfuls of garden mould and disclosing what looked like a very long, bulky bundle of flowered chintz.

Suddenly, in a voice hardly above a whisper, Brampton broke the silence.

"My God!" he said, pointing, and staring with horrified eyes.

From the corner of the wrapper a hand protruded, half covered with earth; it was a white and shapely hand, the hand of a woman.

"Do you see it?" whispered Brampton again, and leant shaking against the wall.

"It's a hand," said Higgs, troubled but stolid.

Gimblet was very pale, and he took a quick breath as he braced himself to lift the enveloping chintz. The lighted windows cast three streaks of light out into the darkness and threw grotesque distorted shadows of the men upon the coping of the balcony. A sudden gust of wind made the trees in the street moan and shiver as though they had been swept by the passing broom of some night-riding hag; all around them the darkness gathered close like a wicked thing that would if it dared swallow up the tiny protecting lights men burn in self-defence.

Gimblet felt himself struggling against some such malevolent influences; half conscious fears, some sensation of evil presences in the air, gibing, mocking, clustering round to gloat over the results of earthly villainy, seemed to paralyse him; and he had to call up his reserves of will power before, after a moment's hesitation, he bent forward and unrolled the chintz covering.

Inside it was the body of a young woman. Long black hair lay in masses on her shoulders and streamed over the single white garment she wore. The face was so terribly disfigured as to be quite unrecognisable.

With a shudder Gimblet drew the wrapping over her again.

"Vitriol," he muttered, and became aware, as he spoke, of some one behind him in the opening of the window.

Before he could turn, a heartstricken cry sounded in his ear, and he was not in time to catch Sir Gregory, who staggered back in the embrasure, and from there slid fainting to the ground. As Gimblet sprang to his help, he had a fleeting vision of a ghastly face and a

crouching figure in the back of the drawing-room: it was the face of Tremmels, the clerk, but so wild and white with terror, so distorted by the shock of what he had seen as to be almost like that of another man.

Suspecting from the noise made by the opening shutters, followed by the sudden and prolonged silence, that something was happening on the floor above them, and unable any longer to bear the suspense and curiosity accentuated by waiting and inactivity, Sir Gregory, followed by the clerk, had crept upstairs into the drawing-room without attracting the attention of Gimblet or his assistants, and the horror of what they had seen was too much for both of them.

As with the help of Higgs Gimblet lifted the inanimate form of the baronet from where it had dropped, a sudden loud noise from the street below made them nearly let fall their burden; and it was a second before any of them realised that the sound was only the first jangling bar of a popular music hall tune. The barrel organ they had heard a quarter of an hour earlier had wandered into Scholefield Avenue, and, attracted without doubt by the lighted windows, had thought fit to draw up before No. 13 and there begin its headlong plunge into melody. Half the rollicking air it was playing had been thumped forth, with all the usual din of banging bass and clanking scales, before any one of those who stood above it in the grim presence of death sufficiently recovered his presence of mind to be able to stop it.

Telling the clerk curtly not to be an ass, but to pull himself together and follow them, Gimblet, with the help of Higgs and Brampton, carried Sir Gregory out of the fatal house and into No. 15, the home of the artist. Here they gave him over to the care of Mrs. Brampton, a capable, bustling woman with common-sense written all over her, to whom her husband

explained in guarded terms as much of the situation as was inevitable.

"There has been a terrible tragedy next door, my dear," he told her. "This poor gentleman has fainted on learning of the death of his friend," and the kind-hearted, sensible creature took charge of Sir Gregory without wasting precious time in questions.

At his request, Brampton conducted the detective to the telephone, while Higgs was sent out to look for a policeman.

"Is that Scotland Yard?" Gimblet was asking, as the artist shut the door on him and returned to his wife.

By the time the detective had finished telephoning, Higgs was back with two policemen, the one he had found in the next street having whistled for a comrade. Gimblet went with them to No. 13, and together they entered the silent drawing-room, where the gas was still flaring and the windows stood open to the night like three black doors to a villainous and tragic world. With the help of the new-comers the body of the dead woman was lifted out of the flower box and carried into the house, where, still enveloped in the chintz cover, it was gently deposited on one of the sofas. For a moment they turned back the wrapping, while Gimblet searched hastily for some clue that should have inadvertently been enclosed in it, but there was nothing besides the body and the one garment in which it was clad.

"See," he murmured in a low voice, pointing to an oblong incision at the edge of the chemise, "they have cut away the linen there. No doubt the name, or initial, was embroidered in that place. What fine linen it is; and this lace trimming is as delicate as a cobweb! If we had nothing else to go by, this would show that the murdered woman was rich and luxury-

loving. Most women, if they had such lace, would keep it to adorn their dresses with."

He drew the covering over her again; and, going back to the balcony, stood looking at the half-empty box and the mound of earth that was heaped upon the floor.

"They must have had a job to clear away the surplus soil," he remarked to Higgs, who had followed him. "I suspect it was carried down to the garden, bucketful by bucketful, and the last handful or two were swept up into a newspaper. I found some trace of it in a cupboard downstairs."

Leaving the police to guard the house, they went in search of Sir Gregory, and found him so far recovered as to be sent home in a taxi in the care of Higgs. The clerk also was seen safely started on the way to his lodgings, where, Gimblet thought to himself, he would probably take the brandy bottle to bed with him.

"You will have to attend the inquest, you know," he said to him as he was departing. "It may be to-morrow or the next day. Good evening, and don't stay awake all night."

After renewed thanks and apologies to the Bramptons, Gimblet found another taxi, and, getting in, gave the driver the address of Joe Sidney's rooms.

"I think," he said to himself, "it's just about time I paid that young gentleman a visit."

CHAPTER XIX

IT was close on eleven when the cab drew up before the door of Sidney's lodging in York Street, St. James's, and as luck would have it Sidney himself was standing on the doorstep, in the act of inserting his latch-key in the lock. Gimblet saw himself recognised as he sprang out of the taxi, and saw also a look of unmistakable pleasure in the recognition.

"This man is as innocent as I am," he thought, as the young soldier greeted him.

"Come in, do," Sidney said, "you're the very man I wanted to see. I went to your flat this evening, but you'd just gone out, so the porter said. I am anxious to hear if you have any news of my aunt and Miss Turner."

He led the way upstairs as he spoke, and ushered the detective into a sitting-room on the first floor, switching on the light as he did so.

Gimblet waited till the door was shut behind them, and then turned a grave face to his host.

"The news is very bad," he said slowly, and waited a moment to give time for the significance of the words to sink in, and to prepare Sidney for what was to come.

"What has happened?" cried Sidney. "Are they hurt? Is Miss Turner——"

He stopped short, grasping the back of a chair.

"I don't know what has happened to Miss Turner," Gimblet said, "but I have terrible news of your poor

aunt. Mrs. Vanderstein has been foully and cruelly murdered. I come now from the discovery of her dead body."

"Murdered!" cried Sidney, "murdered! Who by? How? Where?" He sat down mechanically, and stared at Gimblet. "And Miss Turner? Have they killed her too?"

The detective repeated that at present he knew nothing of the younger lady.

"Good God!" said Sidney, "what a dreadful thing."

Leaning his elbows on the table, he hid his face in his hands for a few minutes, and Gimblet sat silent opposite him, waiting till he should recover from the first shock of the news.

When Sidney raised his head again the face he disclosed was pale and drawn.

"Poor Aunt Ruth," he said. "Poor thing, poor thing. To think that she should be dead. I can hardly realise it, you know. She has been killed for her jewels, I suppose, after all. The devils! You haven't caught them, have you?" and, as Gimblet only shook his head: "How can such a thing be possible here in civilised London? And to think of that beastly old raven, Chark, going about croaking as he has been, and hinting that I'd killed her! To think of his being right after all! I don't mean about my killing her," he added, "but there it is, she's dead; and I come into her money just in time to save me from ruin. I hate the thought of it!" He was talking to himself more than to his listener, and Gimblet let him talk. "I almost wish she had altered her will," he went on, "it's a beastly notion: her death being my profit, you know. And I suppose they'll say I've murdered her all the more now?" He looked up interrogatively; then, as he received no answer, his expression changed and

he started up, alert and wide awake once more. "I say," said he, "do you think I did it, too?"

Gimblet hesitated a moment before answering.

"As a matter of fact," he said at last, "I do not. I don't think so for a moment. But that is merely my personal opinion and, to tell you the truth, I think it will be just as well if you can account for your movements since Monday to the satisfaction of more people than myself. I ought to suspect you—it's my business to suspect every one—but, as I say, I don't."

"I daresay things do look rather black against me," Sidney said; "it's my fault for not having bothered to defend myself. You see, it seems so eccentric to me that anyone should think such a thing. It seems so impossible, and absurd, if you don't mind my saying so. One forgets that other people don't know what one is capable of as one does oneself, and it never struck me yesterday that you, or Sir Gregory either, might suspect me. I did go and see the editor of the worst of the newspapers, and explained things to him, and told him to let old Chark know he was wrong. You may have noticed he's eaten his words in to-day's paper. But I didn't think it necessary to say anything to anyone else. You see, I've got what you call an alibi. I was in the country from Monday evening till yesterday morning. I met a pal almost on Aunt Ruth's doorstep when she turned me out of the house, and he got me to go off with him down to his house near Ascot to play golf, and I was down there till Wednesday. I had only just come back, in fact, when I came to see you. I didn't know about my aunt's disappearance till I read it in the train coming up; my friend came up at the same time and stayed with me till I left him at your door. It's waste of time suspecting me; I admit that it looks as if I ought to have murdered the poor dear, but in view of the facts that theory doesn't hold water."

"I'm very glad to hear what you say," said Gimblet, "and I wish you'd told me before, though I never really thought you had any direct knowledge of the affair. Still, you must confess, Mr. Sidney, that you were not quite open with me: there was something which you knew, and which you kept to yourself when we talked about it."

"I'm blessed if there was!" cried Sidney. "What was it?"

For answer Gimblet took Barbara's telegraph form out of his notebook and handed it to the young man.

"You didn't tell me you had received this telegram from Miss Turner," he said, "not even though I quoted most of its contents to you by way of a hint."

Sidney took the form, and stared at it for a moment.

"It is her writing," he said at last. "I wonder what the deuce she meant."

He, also, produced a folded paper from his pocket and pushed it across the table to the detective.

It was the message as he had received it.

"You will observe," he said, "that there is no signature. How was I to know who it came from? As a matter of fact, I guessed, or at least thought it possible she had sent it, as no one else cares whether I go to blazes or not. But I've no idea whatever why she chose to think I should get some money or good news on Wednesday. I need hardly say that I didn't. And I saw no reason to speak to you of what only concerns a young lady and myself. It can have no possible bearing on her disappearance, or that of my aunt."

"You think not?" Gimblet looked at him oddly.

"How could it? I can't imagine what connection there could be. But of course you're the sort of fellow who can read the secret of dark mysteries in anything, from the Tower Bridge to a baked potato, aren't you?

So perhaps there's some occult inference that I fail to draw. By the way, you've not told me much yet. How did you discover the murder, and where?"

"I found the poor lady's body buried in a house in the north of London," said Gimblet, "No. 13 Scholefield Avenue. As to how I discovered it, it was by the help of two or three facts from which I was able to draw certain inferences."

"I wish you would tell me all about it."

"Well," said Gimblet, "as Sir Gregory told you over the telephone this morning, I heard, as a result of the advertisement I gave you yesterday to have inserted in the papers, that the two ladies were seen by an actress on Monday night, standing under a board 'To Let,' before a detached house in some street on the way to Carolina Road. I was unable to find that street yesterday, and it was not until I could get hold of the cabman who had driven the actress that I ascertained that Scholefield Avenue was the only street he had passed through on Monday night which contains detached houses. I went there at once and found out that No. 13 had recently been let, the board having been removed on Tuesday morning. I rang the bell, but no one came to the door, so after getting the name of the house agent from a neighbour I went to the office and interviewed the agent. From him I learnt that the house had only been let since Monday, and that the tenant was a man named West who had been ready to pay a high rent for immediate possession, and who gave out that he was a recluse, desiring nothing so much as solitude and privacy. The agent happened to have a spare key of No. 13 Scholefield Avenue and he sent his clerk down with me to open the door.

"As soon as I got in I ran over the house with my servant, who as well as Sir Gregory had accompanied

me, but there was no one to be seen in it, and so I proceeded to make a careful and searching examination. Not to weary you with details, I soon found a considerable number of small paste spangles, or imitation diamonds, such as are sewn on to the more elaborate and gorgeous kinds of ladies' evening dresses. As I found several of these on the staircase between the hall and the drawing-room and a good many more in the drawing-room itself, but none in any other part of the house, I thought it was likely that, if they came off Mrs. Vanderstein's gown, this was the only room she had visited. There was, of course, the possibility that they had fallen from the dress of some one who had been in the room before the place was let, but I set against this the improbability of the mistress of the house or her friends being rich people who would wear such expensively ornamented materials, and also the fact that your aunt's maid in describing her toilette to me had spoken of it as '*diamantée*.'

"The next discovery was a most alarming one. On moving the sofa I saw beneath it a large stain in the carpet, which various indications assured me was the result of some acid that had been upset. From the nature of the damage I was pretty certain that it had been caused by sulphuric acid or vitriol. Now this is a strange thing to find traces of in a lady's drawing-room, and when you find it in an empty house which a young and beautiful lady has been seen to enter, but which she has never been seen to leave, and when you further reflect that the disappearance of this lady appears to be complete, and on the fact that when last seen she was wearing a fortune in jewellery, one of two conclusions appears inevitable, unless you assume that all these facts are entirely unconnected and the result of pure coincidence. . Assume them on the contrary to be related to each other, and you are led, as I say, to

consider two possibilities. So I asked myself at once whether Mrs. Vanderstein had been decoyed to the house by some demented creature bent on assuaging a mad jealousy by throwing vitriol at her, or whether she had been induced to visit it to satisfy the still more fatal greed of a robber. And the more I looked at it, the more likely it seemed that the poor lady had been murdered for her jewels and that the vitriol was used to make the recognition of her body, if it should be discovered, a negligible danger. A few minutes later I came across a powder puff perfumed with the peculiar scent your aunt was in the habit of using—I daresay you know it—and this dispelled any doubts I still had as to her having been in the room.

"I still hoped against hope, however, that she might have left it alive, and I found some evidence downstairs which led me to think she had been locked in one of the lower rooms for a time; but if so it must have been before she was taken up to the drawing-room. In the library a pane of the window was broken, no doubt by some one trying to escape or attract attention, and obviously it had been done by a woman, as a man could have opened the window, which was so stiff as to require more than a woman's strength. The broken glass had been carefully removed from the frame, so that, but for the draught, it might well have passed unnoticed.

"That it had been broken since the letting of the house was clear, since I found a dustpan full of broken glass, which would not have been left so by the landlord's servants, or by the charwoman who cleaned up after their departure. The sight of that dustpan filled me with hopes that were doomed to disappointment. Nothing offers a better ground for the impression and retention of finger marks than a piece of shining metal, and I expected to find a whole collection on the tin

surface of the pan. But to my astonishment and disgust I could not find a single one; and this strengthened my opinion that I had to deal with deliberate crime, and that of no ordinary stamp, for it was plain that not only had some one cleaned and polished the dustpan after using it, but that the person who had done so had worn gloves. And it was the same all over the house. Not a finger-print to be seen, except in the room with the broken pane, on the white painted door of which I found several distinct marks of fingers. What more likely than that the poor lady, finding herself locked into a strange room, should have broken the window and beaten on the door with her hands in a sudden panic? In the same cupboard as the dustpan was an old newspaper crumpled into a ball, which I found to contain a handful or so of what appeared to be garden mould, and I could not at first imagine why it should be there, though I can account for it now. I had by this time been all over the house and made the most thorough and exhaustive search, but the only other clue I could discover was a negative one.

"I must tell you that I had made sure that there was no article in the house belonging to the tenant, Mr. West, as he called himself; everything was accounted for in the inventory and belonged to Mr. Mill, the owner. It became clear to me that West must have taken the place for a definite purpose other than the usual one of living in it, and since I knew that it had been occupied on Monday evening, his object doubtless fulfilled itself then in a terrible manner and he probably fled from the scene of his crime the moment he had, to the best of his ability, removed all traces of it. In his haste he had left the little spangles which had scattered themselves in the wake of his victim; and, though he cleaned up the dustpan as if he feared it should tell

tales in spite of the precautionary gloves, he seemed to have thought the broken glass could not betray him, or else, perhaps, he had no time to dispose of it. But, if he had left nothing behind him, it looked as if he had taken something away.

"The chairs and sofas in the drawing-room were provided with loose chintz covers, with one exception. There was a small sofa which stood opposite the door naked and unashamed, in all the hideousness of the original, ugly upholstery. Not only was the tapestry which covered it of a meretricious nineteenth-century design, quite out of keeping with the good taste displayed all over the house in the choice of pattern and decoration, but the legs and arms, which were very much in evidence, were made of brown varnished wood peculiarly objectionable in appearance. It seems to me in the last degree unlikely that in a room so full of beauty and quiet refinement this one thing should have been allowed to flaunt its vulgarity, and hold the eye of the visitor with an awful fascination. I felt convinced that West was responsible for its nakedness, and it was quite likely that he, a man doubtless devoid of any artistic sense, would imagine that the absence of that cover might pass unnoticed, as the tapestry resembled the chintzes in general colouring."

"But why should he remove it? What could he want with a loose chintz sofa cover?" asked Sidney, as the detective paused.

"I asked myself these questions," continued Gimblet, "and I saw that there were only two explanations which met all the facts. It might be that the chintz bore traces of his crime that at all costs must be destroyed; it might be, for instance, stained with blood. But in that case he would probably have tried to burn it; that would be a difficult job, and there was no sign of a fire having been lighted lately in any

of the grates. No coal in the cellar and no firewood. He would have needed brushes and blacking to make all ship-shape again, and his grate cleaning would probably have been amateurish. Or he might have had a use for the chintz. It would be a handy thing to wrap a dead body in before carrying it out to the grave he would dig for it in the garden. For it seemed to me certain that after killing his victim he would have buried her in the garden. There was a toolshed at the end of it, and I hunted there for a spade that should show signs of recent use; but to my surprise there was no spade at all.

"By this time it was dark and late, and I returned to the house with the intention of deferring till to-morrow a search for the grave, which I felt sure of finding if it was there. I had little hope that the poor lady had escaped, but it was still quite possible that my theories were mistaken, and that even the signs of vitriol having been used were capable of some other interpretation; and I gladly admitted to myself that I had no actual proof of foul play. And then, just as I was on the point of knocking off for the night, an elusive memory that had been troubling me ever since I entered the house suddenly flashed clearly into conscious recollection, and I knew that I had made no mistake.

"When I opened the drawing-room door for the first time I had been aware of a faint odour, which I seemed to catch a whiff of as it passed me, so to speak, and to lose again immediately. During the second in which I perceived it, its name was on my tongue, but before I could utter it the smell was gone and with it my knowledge of what it was. I racked my brains to remember it without the least result; but, though I gave up the attempt and concentrated every effort on investigating what was apparent to my other senses, the thing bothered me, and I did not entirely forget it.

As I stood in front of the house after my vain search for a spade, it suddenly flashed into my mind what it was that I had smelt: it was the never to be mistaken smell of chloroform.

"I was staring absently up at the balcony of the drawing-room when the knowledge came to me, and in an instant another light dawned on me with equal suddenness. There was a great box or stand for plants on the balcony, and the neighbour who had given me some information as to the tenant had remarked that the mistress of the house would be sad to see her flowers so neglected. Indeed, they were all faded and withered, and he had implied that it was for want of water. Now, the thought that leapt into my brain as swift and as illuminating as lightning was this one: Why should the flowers die for want of water when we have had constant rain for the last two days? Clearly it was not drought that they were suffering from. But how if the *soi-disant* West, having cruelly murdered your unfortunate aunt, proceeded to uproot the flowers and to bury her, wrapped in the sofa cover, in the flower stand? It was quite large enough for such a purpose, and if he had then replanted the flowers it was probable enough that they would feel the effects of his attempt at gardening.

"I went up at once and put this theory to the test. I am very sorry to say that it proved to be correct in every detail."

Gimblet ceased speaking, and Sidney, who had listened in sad silence, lifted his head, and asked a question.

"The vitriol? They had used it—as you thought?" His voice was hoarse, and his face stern and grim.

"Alas, yes."

"Hanging is too good for such brutes; but I will never rest till they hang for it. Have you any idea who are the fiends who did this?"

"An idea? Say rather that I have a suspicion," returned Gimblet. "Surely you can see the direction in which the circumstances point?"

"Unless it was the chauffeur," said Sidney, "I can't imagine who can have done it."

"I don't think there is anything in the theory that the chauffeur or any one of the servants had a hand in it. There are several things which make that idea hardly worth considering. But there is one person against whom things look very black. Do you mean to say you can't see who it is?"

"No, I can't," repeated Sidney.

"Mr. Sidney," said the detective slowly, "where do you suppose Miss Turner is?"

"I only wish I knew," answered the young man; "it is horrible not to know. Where do you think she can possibly be? Tell me the truth, Mr. Gimblet: do you believe she is dead?" He spoke harshly, and with averted eyes.

"No," said Gimblet, "I don't think she is dead."

Something in his tone made Sidney look up. Gimblet was looking at him with a strange expression, and as their eyes met he turned away uneasily. For a minute Sidney stared at him wonderingly, and then an incredulous enlightenment stole over him.

"You can't mean," he said slowly, "that you imagine she had any knowledge of the attack on my aunt?"

Gimblet was silent; and his silence was more eloquent than words.

"But it is impossible," cried Sidney, "that anyone out of a lunatic asylum should think such a thing. You don't know her, Mr. Gimblet, she is the sweetest, dearest girl. The most unselfish, the most devoted, the loyalest girl in the world! How can you hint at it? Oh, I know it is your business to suspect people,

but you go too far! I cannot hear a word against her."

Gimblet turned and faced him.

"Be reasonable, Mr. Sidney," he said, "and accept it as a fact that the young lady will be suspected. If she is innocent it will be better to try and clear her than to refuse to hear what there is to be said as to her possible complicity. I understand your feelings, but you must see that there is nothing to gain by disguising the truth. It is because I thought it possible that you might feel a keen interest in Miss Turner that I have told you I suspect her. I hope you may be able to help me to convince myself of her innocence, and surely the best way to do that is to try and get at the truth."

"I will try and be reasonable, as you call it," said Sidney, after a pause, "and I suppose by that you mean listening to your abominable accusations. Well, let's hear your evidence, and if I can prevent myself from throttling you I will! More than that no man could say," he added, with an attempt at a smile. "And I feel a beast even to allow you to speak of the thing."

"I am extremely sorry to have to do it," said Gimblet, "but no good ever came of shutting one's eyes to facts, and it's facts that make me suspect Miss Turner. In the first place, there is the fact that she stands to profit by Mrs. Vanderstein's death to the tune of £30,000."

"That applies to me, too, only more so," interrupted Sidney.

"Yes, and I don't think it of much importance," admitted the detective. "I mention it as one of the points which is outside the region of speculation, and therefore not negligible. The second fact is that you were at your wits' end for money."

"I daresay! But what that's got to do with your suspecting Miss Turner beats me," cried Sidney.

"It's got this to do, though I'm afraid you will not like my alluding to your most private affairs—Miss Turner is in love with you. We may call that fact No. 3."

"There is absolutely no foundation for that statement," said Sidney, flushing hotly, while he could not but be conscious of a strange acceleration in the beating of his heart.

"Is there not?" asked Gimblet, looking at him thoughtfully. "Well, we will waive that point if you like. Let us say that Miss Turner has an unusually friendly feeling for you. So friendly that she would go to any length to provide you with the necessary funds. You yourself have as good as told me so much. You cannot deny that she was the person who urged you to try to get the money by false pretences."

"I am sure she did not look at it in that light," protested Sidney, while inwardly he cursed himself for the slip by which, on the previous day, he had allowed the sex of his friend to escape him.

"I saw you with her in the Park last Sunday, did I not?" said the detective; "I noticed her expression. I am rather an observant fellow in my way, you know. I have only seen that look on the faces of people very much in love. I find I must go back to that, after all, in spite of your objection to the suggestion."

"I do object very much. Miss Turner has no such feelings for me, I am sure, and I can't let you impute them to her."

"I am afraid you must," said Gimblet tranquilly. "People who are madly in love," he continued, "as I believe her to be, are capable of any sacrifice, of any heroism, or of any villainy. In that state of exaltation they are apt to lose their sense of proportion, and to confound extremes; they may see in the basest depths of infamy only another aspect of noble heights of self-

abnegation; if the object of their affections is in danger, they may consider no expedient too shameful if it can be made to provide a means of extricating him.

"There is nothing inherently impossible in imagining that Miss Turner, conscious of nothing but your need, blindly strove to supply it and was in no mood to boggle at any feasible method. I don't know if you are aware of the character borne by her father. He was a man of the worst reputation: an utterly merciless and unscrupulous swindler. His daughter may not have escaped the taint of heredity; it is, at all events, conceivable that her principles suffered from her early association with him. He is said to have died in South America, where he was obliged to fly to escape his just deserts, but there is no proof at all that he really did die.

"I know that I am for the moment dealing in theory, if I say, suppose this man to be secretly in London and in secret communication with his daughter. Suppose she let him see how direly she needed money at this moment. Might not a scoundrel of his description seize the opportunity to persuade her to help him in some such nefarious business as the robbery of Mrs. Vanderstein, and secure her silence, if not her assistance, in even a more dastardly business? To return to the realm of fact; the order to the motor not to fetch the ladies from the opera was given by Miss Turner. She ran back alone to tell the chauffeur, after your aunt had gone into the theatre. She had previously sent you this wire, in which she was very positive that the money you required would be forthcoming.

"She was seen by Miss Finner standing at the door of the house in Scholefield Avenue in the company of your aunt, and it is not too much to presume that she subsequently entered it with her. There would be no

imaginable motive to induce a thief or gang of thieves to decoy her to the house: she had no jewels to be deprived of. There would be, on the contrary, every reason why she should be prevented from going anywhere near the place. Since, then, she assuredly went there on her own initiative, it seems probable that Mrs. Vanderstein was persuaded to accompany her by the girl herself.

"To go back for the moment to speculation, one may imagine that it was old Turner who masqueraded as West, the tenant, who is described as a horsey-looking elderly man who had lived much in a hot climate. This accords with a description of Turner I took the trouble to obtain yesterday, with the exception of the beard or imperial worn by West, which he may easily have grown of late years. It may have been the girl's father, therefore, who opened the door to the two women, and who, once he had her safe inside, first locked your aunt in the library while he finished his preparations upstairs, and then led her to the drawing-room, as in times more in harmony with his deeds he might have led her to the nearest tree.

"Finally, in support of this theory, or at least of Miss Turner's complicity in the affair, we have the facts that the two ladies were last seen together, and that, while the one has been found robbed and murdered, the other has departed without a word or a sign. It is only too likely that she is half way to America. The ports are being watched, but by now it is probably too late."

Gimblet finished speaking and sat watching the face of the younger man. Sidney looked troubled, but his manner was confident as he gave his opinion.

"If she has not been heard of," he said, "it is because for some reason she is unable to communicate with anyone. I have heard all your arguments attentively, Mr. Gimblet, and I must confess that you

have not in the least convinced me that there is anything in your idea. It all sounds very plausible, no doubt, but if you knew the young lady as I have the pleasure of doing you would see that the whole thing is ridiculous. No one can be what she is and act in the way you suggest. Her nature is such as to put it out of the question. I can only repeat that the thing is ludicrously impossible, and that if you knew her you would be the first to see it. However, I agree with you that the best way of proving what I say is to find the real murderer. My only fear is that to-morrow you may discover that she too has been killed and buried in the garden."

"I am not afraid of that," said Gimblet, "because, as I tell you, if her presence had not been desirable she would never have been near the place. She would have been kept as unaware of its existence as you were yourself. The first essential of such a plan as the murderer must have concocted would be to get hold of Mrs. Vanderstein alone and unsuspected by anyone who was not a confederate."

Sidney made an impatient movement.

"I am absolutely convinced that Miss Turner had nothing whatever to do with it," he said.

"Well," returned Gimblet as he rose to go, "I hope you are right and that further investigations will lead me to share your view. If we can lay hands on Mr. West we shall get at the truth, and unless he is very careful how he disposes of the jewels we are sure to catch him. From what I hear, Mrs. Vanderstein's rope of pearls is well known to every jeweller in Europe; and, if he tries to sell so much as one of them, he'll find a very different sort of rope around his neck. Now I must be off; they are expecting me at Scotland Yard."

CHAPTER XX

IT was long past one when at last Gimblet got to bed. He had had a long and tiring day, full of strain and excitement, and his head was no sooner on the pillow than he slept soundly and dreamlessly. It seemed to him that he had only just shut his eyes when Higgs awoke him the next morning by coming in with his hot water. He rolled over yawning and rubbing his eyes, as his servant pulled up the blinds and laid ready his clothes. When he had finished and gone away, the detective turned over again for another snooze ; but in a minute Higgs was back again.

" The young man from Ennidge and Pring has called, sir," he said, " the clerk who came with the key last evening, you know, sir. He wants to know if the inquest is to be to-day, as, if not, he has been given a holiday and is going to spend it in the country."

" He can go," said Gimblet ; " the inquest won't be till to-morrow."

He was thoroughly awakened by now, and went to his bath as soon as Higgs had departed.

Breakfast was on the table when he entered the dining-room, and he helped himself to omelet and sat down and poured out his tea before he took up the morning paper, which lay beside his plate.

As he folded back the sheet and cast his eye over the page, he uttered a startled exclamation and sat staring incredulously at the paper as he read :

MYSTERY OF MISSING LADIES PROVES MYTHICAL.

Mrs. Vanderstein is Staying at Boulogne.

"Our correspondent at Boulogne telegraphs that Mrs. Vanderstein, of 90 Grosvenor Street, is staying at the Hôtel de Douvres in that town. Having observed her name in the visitors' book of the hotel, our correspondent inquired of the manager if the lady could be she who had been reported missing for the last two or three days, and learnt that, while the manager was unaware of the anxiety which has been felt in England on her account, it is certainly Mrs. Vanderstein, of 90 Grosvenor Street, who is at present beneath his roof. Further conversation with the affable and obliging host of the Hôtel de Douvres elicited the information that the lady arrived early on Tuesday morning with the intention of staying for one night only. She complained of feeling indisposed, however, and sent for a doctor, who ordered complete rest; so that Mrs. Vanderstein kept her room till this evening, when, her health being improved, she dined in her apartment as usual, but afterwards went out to the Casino.

"As luck would have it, the manager was relating these details to our correspondent at the very moment —about 11 p.m.—when a carriage drove up to the door, and the lady herself re-entered the hotel. On our correspondent's introducing himself and explaining that grave anxiety was being felt on her behalf in this country, she expressed considerable astonishment, and said that this explained the fact that letters she had written had not been answered. She conjectured further that they could not even have been delivered, remarking that the French postal system left much to be desired. In reply to further questions, the lady proclaimed her aversion to being

interviewed, and said merely that she would send some telegrams in the morning; upon which our correspondent withdrew, and she entered the lift and mounted to the first floor, where she has a suite of rooms.

"Mrs. Vanderstein, who appeared to be entirely recovered in health, was elegantly dressed in a black and white casino costume, with a rose coloured toque trimmed with an osprey, which was very becoming to her dark hair and superb complexion. She was wearing some of the magnificent jewels with which rumour has been so busy during the last few days."

Gimblet read the paragraph twice, and then pushing back his chair walked restlessly about the room. His appetite was gone for the time being; his eyes glowed again with the excitement of a new problem. One second he spared, in which to be glad that Mrs. Vanderstein still lived; he was glad for Sir Gregory's sake, and for Sidney's sake, and even a little for her own, though he had never to his knowledge set eyes on her. But from the first he had felt an indefinable sympathy for the fastidious lady whose house was scented with the delicate, delicious perfume that he associated with her name. But, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Vanderstein, alive and well and disporting herself at Boulogne, slipped quickly out of the place in Gimblet's interest hitherto filled by Mrs. Vanderstein dead and cruelly murdered. His mind now occupied itself busily and eagerly with the questions raised by this shifting of rôles in the tragedy of Scholefield Avenue.

If Mrs. Vanderstein had not played the piteous part of the victim on that fatal Monday night, who had? Not Miss Barbara Turner, for she was described as having very fair hair, while that of the murdered woman was very dark. And if Miss Turner were not flying

from justice, where was she? Could she and Mrs. Vanderstein have combined to kill their hostess, when they visited the house hired by Mr. West of tropical origin? In any case here was a tangled knot to unravel, and a black crime to bring home to its perpetrator. Gimblet saw that he was not likely to solve the puzzle off-hand, and reflected that in the meantime he had better fortify himself with food while he had the opportunity. His breakfast was rather cold by the time he again sat down to it.

What, in heaven's name, had Mrs. Vanderstein and Miss Turner been doing in that house on Monday night? Had Miss Finner been mistaken, after all, and was it not they whom she had seen before the door? If so, by what astounding coincidence had he been led to search there of all places, by what incredible freak had Fortune taken him to the scene of this black and cold-blooded crime? His brain, while he ate, busied itself with these and such-like riddles.

Soon after breakfast a high official from the Yard called for him in accordance with arrangements made the night before, and they set forth together in a taxi for Fianti's.

"For," said the official, as they went, "whether it was Mrs. Vanderstein or some one else whose body you found, we want the man who did it equally badly, and we want your help in finding him. I suppose your commission from Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones dies a natural death now?"

"I suppose so," said Gimblet, "but I'll see him presently and let you know. There's still Miss Turner to account for, but I daresay she's at Boulogne too."

"As likely as not," agreed his companion. "It's just the sort of little detail they'd forget to mention."

"Well, we shall soon know," was Gimblet's only comment.

At Fianti's they sent up their cards by the detective of the regular force who was always in attendance on the Prince and Princess of Targona, with a request for the favour of an audience. They had not long to wait, and were very graciously received by Prince Felipe, who listened with grave attention to the explanation of the object of their visit, and read the note presented for his inspection by Gimblet with a lively curiosity.

No, His Highness was afraid he could not assist them in this matter. The writing paper was certainly his —how obtained he could offer no suggestion—the writing was of course a forgery, if that could be called a forgery which made absolutely no pretence of resembling the original. He had no notion to whom the appellation of Madame Q. might refer. No doubt more than one lady whose name began with that initial had been presented to him on different occasions, but he could not for the moment recall. . . . Possibly some of his suite could be of more assistance.

But no one of the Prince's household could give them any help. In the matter of the writing paper, it was suggested that the hotel servants might know something as to how it was obtained, but nothing definite could be found out about it.

The Prince sent for them again before they left, but it was only to say that they had his best wishes for the success of their investigations, and to ask a few questions as to points of English police procedure in which he appeared to be interested.

"Truly, a strange country!" he murmured from time to time on receiving the answers to his inquiries.

Before they were dismissed, Gimblet once more produced the crumpled paper which bore the Targona arms over the Prince's name, and asked the Prince if he could detect a certain odour which clung about it.

"Delicious," said Prince Felipe, when he had pressed it to his nose, "a delicate, pungent fragrance! But no, I do not know what it is."

The official parted from Gimblet at the door of Fianti's and while the one returned in a hurried taxi to his sanctum at Scotland Yard, the other strolled across the street to Mrs. Vanderstein's house.

He found a relieved and rejoicing household.

"You've seen the news, of course, sir," said Blake, himself opening the door in answer to the detective's ring. "And we've had a telegram this morning. Here it is."

He handed it to Gimblet, who read:

"Blake 90 Grosvenor Street London W. Think letters must have missed am staying at Hotel de Douvres Boulogne till further notice writing.

"VANDERSTEIN."

The telegram had been sent off at 8.14 that morning.

"I suppose Miss Turner is with her, sir," Blake was saying, as Gimblet gave him back the paper, "the newspaper doesn't mention her."

"No," said Gimblet. "Still, as you say, I daresay she is there all the same. It is Mrs. Vanderstein, and above all Mrs. Vanderstein's jewels, that the public is interested in."

He went back to his flat, where he found Sidney and Sir Gregory, both radiant.

"What splendid news!" Sir Gregory greeted him as they met, with a joyful cry. "I could not believe it at first; it seems too good to be true. But oh, Mr. Gimblet! what a night I have spent! I shall send that reporter man a fiver. These newspaper chaps sometimes have their uses, after all!"

"I hope you see now," Sidney remarked, "what a

mistake it is to suspect people of doing impossible things."

Sir Gregory looked towards them with a puzzled expression. Gimblet, however, merely smiled.

"I am delighted to be in the wrong, Mr. Sidney," was all he said.

"She will laugh when she hears what a fuss I've been making," resumed Sir Gregory, pursuing his own thoughts. "I think I shall run over to Boulogne to-morrow and see her. I assure you, Mr. Gimblet, I feel ten years younger again. What a nightmare it has been!"

"I found a wire for me at the club," put in Sidney; "she says she is sorry we have been worried, and that her letter must have missed the post. It's jolly good of her to wire to me; I didn't think she meant to have anything more to do with me when I last saw her."

"It looks as if she had forgiven you, doesn't it?" said Gimblet.

He was thinking that it was not every young man in Sidney's position who would have looked so delighted to hear that his aunt was alive after all, when all his difficulties seemed removed by her supposed death.

"She doesn't say a word about Miss Turner," Sidney continued. "She might have, you'd think. Of course she doesn't realise in the least that we've been imagining her murdered."

"I telegraphed this morning as soon as I'd seen the paper," said Sir Gregory, "and said we had been most anxious and that I trusted they were both well. I expect there will be an answer for me by the time I get back. Must be going now in fact. You see she has been ill; kept her room till last night, the hotel man said."

"It's a very odd business," said Gimblet. "I have done a little telegraphing on my own account, I may

tell you, for I want to know whether Mrs. Vanderstein did go to Scholefield Avenue, or whether Miss Finner took some one else for her. I ought to get the reply any minute. And the police are sending a man of theirs over to see her, by the afternoon boat. They want me to help them with investigations of the tragedy we discovered yesterday. I suppose, Sir Gregory, that I can be of no further use to you ? "

" Thankee, Mr. Gimblet, I hope I shan't trouble you any more."

After a little more mutual congratulation the two visitors took themselves off, and Gimblet composed himself to await the answer to his telegram, which was now due.

He was sitting contemplating his Teniers, the beauties of which he had not had much leisure to gaze at of late, and munching sweets as he mused, when the expected ring came at the door of the flat ; but instead of the message he thought to receive it was Inspector Jennins from Scotland Yard, an astute and good-humoured officer, who had before now been his associate in more than one important case.

" I came round to tell you, Mr. Gimblet," he exclaimed as he was shown in, " that the young lady has been found."

" What, Miss Turner ? "

" That's it. She's in the Middlesex Hospital and, what's more, has been there all the time."

" Then how in the world was it that no one knew it ? That was one of the first places I inquired at, and I daresay you did too."

" Yes ; she was brought in on Wednesday morning about 3 a.m. by a police constable who had been on night duty in Regent's Park. He saw her knocked down by a man, and picked her up unconscious, and she has been so ever since. The man got away in the

dark, and at the hospital no one recognised the young lady from the description given in the inquiries that were made, as the account of the clothes she wore was all wrong. But there have been a lot of photographs of her and Mrs. Vanderstein in the papers to-day and yesterday, and this morning one of the nurses who'd been studying her portrait recognised the original in spite of her wounds. The hospital authorities communicated with us, and I'm off to the hospital now. I thought perhaps you'd like to come."

"I should, certainly," said Gimblet, and they were soon on their way.

"I have only once seen Miss Turner, and that was only a passing glimpse," Gimblet said as the taxi sped along. "Don't you think it would be a good plan to take one of the Grosvenor Street servants with us to identify the young lady? It is possible that the nurse may be mistaken; people look so different in a horizontal position. And their saying that her clothes were wrongly described looks to me as if there were some error somewhere."

"I think that's a very good idea of yours," agreed Jennins, and putting his head out of the window he told the driver to go to 90 Grosvenor Street.

They called for Amélie, Mrs. Vanderstein's maid, who appeared after a few minutes, in high delight and excitement at the prospect of assisting the police. She looked rather reproachfully at Gimblet, as though she would have liked to point out to him that it was to be regretted that he had hitherto failed to appreciate how valuable her co-operation might be. "Ah, cette pauvre demoiselle," she murmured as they got into the cab; and her manner indicated that she would have liked to add: "How different it would have been if you had consulted me earlier."

At the hospital there was a little delay before they

were led upstairs and handed over to the guidance of a pleasant-faced nurse who led them to a ward full of casualty cases, which had suffered various injuries at the hands of Fortune.

In one bed was a woman who had been knocked down by a van ; in the next a child who had fallen into the kitchen fire ; in the third a woman whose husband had kicked her to the very verge of the grave ; the fourth held a girl with an arm crushed in the machinery of the factory she worked in—so the nurse informed the inspector.

She led the party through the ward, keeping up a running commentary as they advanced, till they reached the end bed of all, in which lay a young girl whose head was covered with bandages, and who lay quiet and still as if asleep.

"Here she is," said their guide.

Gimblet looked at Amélie.

"Mais oui, monsieur," she answered his unspoken question. "C'est bien Mademoiselle Turner. Ah, là là ! the poor one, what have they done to her ? "

Barbara looked terribly white and fragile. Her face had grown thin to emaciation, and there were deep blue lines under her eyes.

"Poor young lady," said the nurse, "she's got concussion of the brain, and it must have been a frightful blow that did it."

When they left the ward Gimblet asked : "How was it Miss Turner was not recognised till to-day ? "

"Well," said the nurse, "you see the pictures in the papers aren't very good, and her hair is so hidden by the bandages that it's rather hard to see the likeness. But what really put us off here was the description of the clothes she was supposed to have been wearing. Of course no one ever thought of connecting her with a

young lady in a white evening dress and a red opera cloak!"

"Why," asked Jennins, "were those not the colours she wore?"

"Just wait a moment," said the nurse; "I'll show you her things."

She hurried away and returned in a minute with a bundle of apparel.

"Look at them," she said, and held them up for them to see. "Look at this old black coat and skirt; do you see how threadbare and old-fashioned it is? It isn't even very clean. And this horrible hat," she pointed to a battered straw, "it is almost in pieces; and the boots are, quite. Her underclothes were of such coarse, stiff calico that you would take them for workhouse things, and all darned and mended till you could hardly see the original stuff. The stockings weren't even mended. They were just one large hole. And there was no blouse under the coat at all. Nothing but a chemise. How was one to imagine that this was the young lady who was being inquired for? There's a tremendous amount in appearances, and she appeared to be the poorest of the poor."

Gimblet seized upon the miserable garments and examined them eagerly. But they rendered him no information. Nothing was marked, the boots were odd ones and of a prehistoric age; there was no distinctive feature about any of the things.

With injunctions that they should be telephoned to if Miss Turner awoke to consciousness, they left the hospital and dismissed Amélie, who went back to Grosvenor Street to pack and return to the hospital with some of Barbara's belongings, so that she might find them there if they were needed.

"Now what I want is to see the constable who

brought that young lady into the hospital," Gimblet said to Jennins.

" So do I," said the inspector. " He's been sent for and should be at the Yard by now," and they drove off in another taxi.

Police-Constable Matterson of S division had already arrived, and was awaiting them when they reached Scotland Yard. Jennins called him into his private office, and there, in response to their questions, he told his story.

" At about 2 a.m. on Wednesday morning," said he, " it being a dark, wet night, with the rain pouring down like water out of a bucket, and the thunder claps as near overhead, and as frequent, as ever I heard, I was on duty near St. Mark's Church just outside Regent's Park. There is a small bridge for foot passengers across the canal opposite and I crossed it on my way to the outer circle of the Park. I was just resting a minute on the bridge, for I didn't like to stay under the trees more than I need with that storm so close, when a flash of lightning that must have been almost over me, it was that bright, showed up the canal below, as I leant on the parapet, so clear that I could have counted every blade of grass. There was the canal winding out of sight, and the surface of it all jumping and hissing as the rain-drops hit it ; and there were the banks on either side and the trunks of the trees lit up as light as day. But the thing that caught my eye was the sight of two people struggling on the bank, a few yards from the water. It was a man and a woman, and he seemed to be trying to catch hold of her round the neck, while she was dodging and defending herself as best she could. It was all very clear for half a second and then the dark swallowed everything up again, and the thunder burst, as it seemed, just on my head.

" Apart from what I had seen it seemed to me that

folks wouldn't be out for any good in that weather, and at that hour and place; and when the noise of the clap rumbled away I caught the sound of the tail end of a scream which made me sure of it. I turned my lantern towards the place and hollered back, running to get over the fence and down to the canal as I did so.

"As I came near to where I'd seen the pair, two successive flashes coming close one after the other showed them up again no more than a few yards away, and they saw me in the same instant. The man had got a great spade in his hand, and when he caught sight of me he lifted it up sideways and aimed a fearful blow at the woman with the edge of it. She ducked and dodged again—very active she was, poor thing—and he missed, so that the blade glanced off her shoulder and he as near as possible lost his balance But he recovered himself at once and threw up his arms again with the spade clutched in both hands, as I saw by the second flash, and brought it down with all his force flat on the top of her head.

"I didn't see her go down, for the light went before the blow had fallen, and in the dark I lost him, and he got clear away.

"While I was groping about with my lantern, I fell over the body of the girl, lying where he had struck her to the ground, and at the first start off I thought he had done for her sure enough. So I let her lie for a few minutes, while I blew my whistle and kept on searching around for the scoundrel. Two more of our men came up after a time and we had a regular hunt, but he'd got a good start and we never saw him. On turning our attention to the girl again, we found that she was still alive, though unconscious, so we got an ambulance and took her to the hospital. There was nothing to show who she was, but from her clothes I judged her to be one of the lowest and poorest class. I

reported the occurrence at the time, and made a further search by daylight on the spot. I picked up the spade near by, where the fellow had evidently dropped it as he ran; it had a piece of stout cord attached to the handle about four or five feet long, but was otherwise without distinguishing mark of any kind. It's outside, if you wish to see it, sir."

Jennins told him to bring it in.

"Of course," he said to Gimblet, "no one ever thought of connecting this story of violence and brutality with the two missing ladies. The report didn't come my way, as it happens, but I don't suppose for a moment I should have been a scrap the wiser if it had. Still, it makes one feel a bit foolish now, I'll own."

Matterson returned with the spade and cord, which proved to be very ordinary; and Gimblet's inquiring lens could discover nothing about them in any way remarkable.

"What was the man like?" he asked the policeman.

"I didn't have much time to take notice, sir," replied Matterson, "but he was a dark fellow with a black beard, and tall."

"Did you see if he wore gloves?"

"Come to think of it, now you ask me, sir, I believe he did. I saw his hands plain enough as he lifted the spade, and I ought to know. But I couldn't swear to it, I'm afraid, though my impression is that he did, and that it struck me as curious at the time, in the sort of way a thing will strike you for a moment and then slip out of your memory like a dream does."

CHAPTER XXI

"I BET it's our man," said Gimblet, as Jennins dismissed the constable.

"Well, he must have altered his appearance if he is Mr. West, the gentleman from South America, unless Matterson's account is very wrong indeed," was Jennin's only comment. "Aren't you going a bit out of your way, Mr. Gimblet," he asked, "to see any connection between this violent attempt on Miss Turner's life and the actual murder which has taken place at 13 Scholefield Avenue? For my part I don't see any reason to think the two affairs have anything to do with each other. I admit it looked as if Miss Turner and Mrs. Vanderstein had been in the house, but surely that theory is disposed of now and it is clear that your friend the actress was mistaken in thinking it was them she saw. Remember, she didn't even know them by sight, but merely guessed at their identity from the description in the advertisement: two ladies in white, one wearing a red cloak and the other a mauve one. Why, there may have been dozens of couples dressed in these colours going about London on Monday, or any other night!"

"But the jewels," said Gimblet, "she saw them too, you know."

"Mrs. Vanderstein hasn't a monopoly of diamonds. And besides, at that distance, and at the pace Miss Finner was going, she could only have received the vaguest impression, in any case."

"I suppose I have got my head full of Scholefield Avenue," said Gimblet. "I admit that I find it very hard to remember that Mrs. Vanderstein, at all events, is a very long way from that spot. And I daresay you are right, and Miss Turner never was much nearer to it. Still . . ." Gimblet fell into an introspective silence from which he soon roused himself with a start. "Tell me what you think, Jennins," he said. "Have you any theory?"

"I haven't any theory about the Scholefield Avenue business," replied Jennins reluctantly, "but there doesn't seem much mystery about the other affair, to my way of thinking. Surely it is clear that when Mrs. Vanderstein went off so secretly to Boulogne, for some reason she wished it to appear that Miss Turner went with her, while as a matter of fact the young lady remained in London. Ten to one we shall find that Mrs. Vanderstein had a more compromising companion with her in France than she left in England. Miss Turner, no doubt, retired to some secluded spot till her presence should be again required, probably to lodgings near Regent's Park. Very likely she stayed indoors all day for fear of meeting acquaintances who might call for troublesome explanations as to her presence there, and being in want of exercise and fresh air went for a walk at night in order to procure them. Is it surprising that this ruffian of whom Matterson caught a glimpse, meeting her at such an hour and in so lonely a place, should not have spared her his unwelcome advances? Matterson saw him trying to put an arm round her neck, and it was very natural for her to scream in such circumstances. On our man running up, the black-bearded loafer, thinking himself caught, struck out at the girl in a fit of temper, and then took to his heels just in time to save himself."

"All very fine, Jennins," said Gimblet, "but I can

pick holes in that theory till you'll take it for a sieve. To put aside the question whether such a young lady as Miss Turner is said to be would lend herself to the deception you suggest, is it conceivable that, if she did go out to seek fresh air after dark, she should defer doing so till two in the morning and then choose a particularly violent thunderstorm to walk about in? Would her desire for exercise have led her to stand half way up the embankment of the canal when the rain was falling in torrents, and had been doing so since midnight? There is another thing as inexplicable, and that is the attire in which she took this midnight ramble. The clothes we saw at the hospital were mere rags. It seems incredible that this young lady, whom we know to have been clad on Monday night in purple and fine linen, should have been going about on Wednesday morning in garments which were not only threadbare and indescribably ancient but actually dirty. The battered state of the hat may be due to the blow from the spade, and all the garments were of course drenched by the rain, but there is something beyond that in their repulsiveness. I can't imagine how she can have brought herself to wear such things.

"Apart from this behaviour of hers, which is in itself a mystery, what was the black-bearded one doing in the same place and hour and in the same unpropitious conditions? They could hardly both have been wandering there for the innocuous purpose you attribute to Miss Turner. And, mark you, the man was no destitute waif devoid of the means of procuring himself shelter from the rain. He carried a good serviceable spade which would have got him the price of a night's lodging whenever he liked to pawn it. Now the kind of rough you are thinking of does not carry a spade or anything so suggestive of hard and honest labour. On the other hand, who does use that

implement in a town like this? A gardener might have one, or a scavenger; or one or two other people. I think one of the most likely, especially at night, would be a gravedigger."

"There you go!" exclaimed Jennins; "your mind is running on bodies buried in the flower pots! I suppose you think this fellow was going to bury the girl in one of the beds in the park!"

"It's all very strange," mused Gimblet, unheeding the inspector's jeering tones. "The rope now. That is a puzzle. What could he be going to do with a rope? And why was it tied to a spade? Had he got the thing in his hands when he was trying to put his arms round Miss Turner's neck? It must have hampered him a good deal and perhaps helped her to avoid his clutches." Gimblet, with unseeing eyes, stared fixedly at his companion, his mind busy with the problem. Suddenly a light seemed to fall upon it. "By Jove!" he cried, "I believe I see the whole thing. If only Matterson were certain about the gloves."

"What is it?" asked Jennins eagerly.

"No, no," said Gimblet. "It is too wild an idea at present, though indeed I do not think I can be mistaken. But you have all the facts before you, Jennins, and are as able to come to the right conclusion as myself. I will leave you to think over the puzzle, while I go back to my flat and see if the answer to the wire I sent to Mrs. Vanderstein has yet arrived. It ought to be there by now."

But he found no telegram awaiting him. He was annoyed and surprised at this, but the time taken by foreign telegrams is always uncertain, and Mrs. Vanderstein might have been out when his reached Boulogne. Lunch was being kept warm for him, and he made a hearty meal of Scotch woodcock and asparagus;

with which he drank iced coffee and ate sponge cake instead of bread. There were strawberries to finish up with, and he left the dining-room with a peaceful smile on his face.

It was three o'clock, and the telegram was still undelivered.

Gimblet decided to wait in for it, and, having now leisure to think of others, rang up Sidney on the telephone and told him of the discovery of Barbara Turner's whereabouts.

Incoherent questions came to him over the wire, but after a minute or two Sidney said "good-bye" and rang off hastily. The detective smiled as he hung up the receiver. In his mind's eye he saw the young man dash out and drive swiftly in the direction of the hospital, and indeed the picture his imagination drew for him could not have been more accurate.

The afternoon passed and the evening wore away, and yet no wire came from Mrs. Vanderstein. It was tiresome, and Gimblet felt irritated with the lady for her lack of courtesy. Surely she might have replied by now. He felt that she held the clue to many things which perplexed him, and he could not understand her failure to give it to him. His own telegram had been very urgent. Well, the police were sending a man to see her; he was to go over by the 2.20 from Charing Cross, and by now he would be arriving at Boulogne. There could not be much more delay, telegram or no telegram.

Gimblet gave up waiting and went out again. He felt he must go to Scholefield Avenue once more. The tragedy that had taken place there filled his thoughts; and, being convinced in spite of Jennin's contemptuous incredulity that the two mysteries were in some remote way connected, he was inclined to go and see if there were not some trifling point about things at

No. 13 which he had overlooked, instead of waiting longer for the minute glimmer of light which Mrs. Vanderstein might be able to throw upon the darkness with which the whole affair was enveloped.

Scholefield Avenue looked very quiet and peaceful in the evening light; the few boys who still hovered about the gate, survivals of the crowd which the report of the murder had gathered there earlier in the day, wore the tranquil air of those to whom time is no object, and Gimblet, looking up and down the road, where the shadows lay long and the air was cool in the green twilight of the overhanging trees, thought again what a good place the murderer had chosen for his deed. Who would ever suspect evil in so calm and bright an oasis among the mazes of dusty, traffic-worn streets which surrounded it on every hand?

The house was in charge of a couple of policemen, who let Gimblet in without demur when he showed them his card, and followed him with their eyes with looks in which curiosity and admiration were blended. He went over the garden again, examining half-obliterated footmarks, and poking about between flowering plants lest something should be thrust away there and had escaped his notice. Then into the house, where he renewed his search, but without result. He looked into the drawing-room again, where all was as he had left it except that the body had been removed to a bedroom, then went into the library and gazed again at the dirty finger marks on the white paint of the door. Whose fingers were they, he wondered, which had left so many imprints? Was it the murdered woman who had been shut up in that room? Had Mrs. Vanderstein and her companion been there too, or was Jennins right, and their presence in that vicinity on Monday night been a figment of Miss Finner's excited imagination?

His thoughts reverted to the powder puff and the forged note, and he took the folded paper from his pocket book and sniffed at it again. The odour of scent, now faint indeed, but still clinging sweetly to the impassioned words, was unmistakably that which hovered about the house in Grosvenor Street. Arome de la Corse, it was called, he remembered, and Amélie had said that Mrs. Vanderstein had it sent to her direct from Paris. Such extraordinary things happen every day that anything short of a miracle hardly attracts attention, but surely it would be a strain on the long arm of coincidence to suppose that, having strayed on to the scene of a murder owing to the mistaken idea that he was on the track of Mrs. Vanderstein, he should then find that not only did the dead woman resemble that lady and wear similar clothes but that she even used the same uncommon perfume ! Gimblet's whole soul revolted at such an impossibility. In the name of common sense, he said to himself, it must be Mrs. Vanderstein who had been seen on the doorstep on Monday night, and none other, in spite of all probability to the contrary ; though what she was doing in that *galère* certainly seemed incomprehensible from nearly every point of view.

No contingency was ever dismissed by Gimblet as too wild for consideration, and the only reasonable explanation of her presence, he felt, was that she was in some way mixed up with the murder, an accomplice at least, if not the actual author of the deed ; but this view involved so complete a shifting of ideas, that he put it aside for further consideration in the light of the information which the man sent by Scotland Yard to Boulogne might be able to furnish. If only the walls could speak ! he thought, as he finally realised that nothing more was to be gathered, and, before leaving the room, strolled over to the mantelpiece in order to

have a nearer look at the picture which hung there, and which he had noticed the day before.

It was a small oil painting, dark with dirt and age, and much of the detail lost in a general blackness. Still the figures, those of a man in blue and another in greenish brown in the act of lighting a long pipe, could be clearly enough distinguished, together with enough of the background to make it plain that this represented an interior. Gimblet studied it with the keenest appreciation ; it was just the class of picture he most delighted in. A longing took him to remove it from its nail and carry it to the light, and with rather a guilty glance back at the door, which he had, however, shut as he entered, he put up his hand and lifted it off.

As he delicately lowered his prize he caught sight of something which made him very nearly drop it.

On the square of wall paper which had been hidden by the picture was some pencilled writing, scrawled irregularly in a large round hand :

" I am locked in this room. I write this hoping it may be the means of delivering these people to justice, for I am sure they intend no good. I can see that by the fact that the man with the black beard has promised to help me to escape. Why should there be need to escape ? But I do not believe he will keep his word. I have been here so long, I do not know how long, but many hours, perhaps days, and God knows what dreadful thing they are doing in the drawing-room to Mr "

The writing broke off abruptly about half way down the square of darker colour, where the paper had been prevented from fading by the protecting picture. Gimblet gazed at it with all the emotions of the

scientist whose theory has stood the decisive test. His hands fumbled in his excitement, as he hastily snatched out his notebook, and sought in it for the telegraph form Higgs had obtained from the Piccadilly office. He flattened it against the wall below the pencilled words, more in order to gloat over this proof of the soundness of his deductions than for the sake of comparing the two handwritings, for it had only needed the first glance to make it plain to him that they were one and the same. The writing on the wall was larger; the letters followed each other unevenly, and while some of the lines drooped lower and lower as they advanced, others rose crookedly to meet them, so that one or two actually overlapped and were rather hard to decipher, but the essential character of the hand was clearly identical with that of the telegram. There was no mistaking the slant of the short line of the h's or the oval converging lines of the w's and the low crossing of the t's, besides a hundred other small points which left the trained eye in no doubt as to the authorship of the message.

"I wonder what Jennins will say to this," thought Gimblet, as he copied down the words on a page of his notebook. "That Scholefield Avenue has got on my brain, I suppose."

Excited as he was, he did not forget his original purpose in taking down the painting, but carried it to the window and examined it closely by the now diminishing light. On nearer inspection it proved to be of less interest than he had expected, and he hung it up again with the less regret.

"But even Jennins will have to admit that a leaning towards Art comes in very useful sometimes," he thought, as he once more hid the scrawled message from view.

It was long past eight when the detective returned

to his flat, only to find that there was still no answer to his telegram to Boulogne.

"Nothing has come and no one has been to see us since you went out, sir," Higgs told him.

Higgs always spoke of himself as "us" when he was engaged on Gimblet's affairs, just as he alluded, with a fine impartiality, to matters in which his master alone was concerned as "ours."

"They've been ringing us up from the Yard," he went on, "been ringing every few minutes for the last half-hour, and said I was to ask you to speak to them on the telephone the minute you come in. There they go again," he concluded, as the bell tinkled violently in the library at the same moment as there came a ring at the front door.

Gimblet hurried to the instrument and Higgs went to answer the door.

"Are you there?"

"Yes, is that Mr. Gimblet? Hold the line, please, sir."

In a moment Jennins' voice sounded in his ear.

"Mr. Gimblet, that you? Oh, Mr. Gimblet, our man has wired from Boulogne and it appears that things have taken a very unexpected turn. I daresay you've seen an evening paper?"

Gimblet had heard so much when the library door burst open, and Sir Gregory rushed into the room.

"Look at this," he almost screamed, evidently beside himself with some painful emotion. "Look at this!"

He waved an evening paper.

"Oh, do go away, Sir Gregory," said Gimblet; "can't you see I'm busy? Hullo, Jennins! Jennins, are you there?"

But Sir Gregory would not be denied. Seizing Gimblet's arm he tore him away from the telephone,

and holding the newspaper under his eyes pointed to it with a shaking hand. He would have spoken, but sobs choked his utterance, and, glancing at him for the first time and in no very friendly humour, Gimblet was surprised to see that tears were rolling down the kindly pink face.

"Why, what's the matter?" he said, but Sir Gregory only pointed to the unfolded sheet. The detective's eyes at last followed the outstretched finger, and he read:

"Murder of Mrs. Vanderstein.

"Missing Lady Found Dead in Her Hotel at Boulogne."

CHAPTER XXII

"WHAT do you think about going over to Boulogne, Mr. Gimblet?"

It was the following morning, and Jennins was sitting in Gimblet's rooms. He had come round to talk matters over and discuss plans and methods of carrying them out.

"I think I may be more useful if I stay here," Gimblet said, in answer to his question. "Your fellow, Burford, who is over there, is a good sound man who will, at least, not overlook the obvious, and Bonnot, the French detective, who is said to have been summoned, is a master of his profession. These murders are certainly the work of the same gang, and it may be easier to trace them here in London, if it is, as it appears to be, their starting point, than it will be to do so in a foreign country. There is no more news from Burford, I suppose?"

"Nothing new since last night. And no more than the papers have, anyhow. These reporters are the deuce."

"They are," Gimblet agreed. "Let's see again what they say about it." He took up a paper, turned to the sinister headline, and read aloud:

"A startling sequel has followed the mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Vanderstein and Miss Turner, who left their home early in the week and whose whereabouts were only yesterday discovered. One

of these ladies, Mrs. Vanderstein, who, it will be remembered, we ascertained to be staying at Boulogne, was found dead in her room at the Hôtel de Douvres yesterday afternoon, and foul play is strongly suspected. Traces of violence were plainly to be seen and it is thought likely that the poor lady was strangled to death. A curious feature of the affair is that though Mrs. Vanderstein had with her a large quantity of her valuable jewellery, some of which was actually lying on the table at the time, so far as is at present known none of it has been stolen.

"A page in the service of the hotel reports that he showed a visitor to Mrs. Vanderstein's room soon after luncheon, and this stranger, who is described as a tall man with a black beard, left the hotel shortly before three o'clock, after delivering a message from the lady to the effect that she did not wish to be disturbed again that day. The order was duly given to the domestics of the hotel, and if a messenger from London had not arrived by the five o'clock boat on important business and insisted on penetrating to Mrs. Vanderstein's presence, it is probable that the murder would not have been discovered until to-day. The authorities are investigating the affair with the utmost energy, and it is believed that they are on the track of the man with the black beard."

Gimblet put down the paper. "There are various other paragraphs saying the same thing in different words," he remarked.

"It certainly looks as if you were right again," observed Jennins reflectively, "about all this being the work of the same gang, I mean."

"There's not a doubt of it," said Gimblet. "I was sure of it from the first, though I admit that I had not much to go on. A mere whiff of perfume. Let us

see how much we know now. To go back to Monday night, Mrs. Vanderstein and Miss Turner voluntarily entered the house in Scholefield Avenue, though whether in response to an invitation from the so-called West or not we do not know, in spite of a theory I have on the subject. They then presumably separated, Miss Turner being imprisoned in the room on the ground floor, very much against her will and to her alarm since she broke a window in the hope of escaping, and when that attempt failed wrote a despairing message on the wall, in which she stated her fear that something dreadful was being done to somebody in the drawing-room. You will, I am sure, agree with me that, though the message says that her alarm was for 'Mr' and then stops, an *s* would have been added if Miss Turner had not been interrupted, and it was her intention to write 'Mrs.' But whether this would have referred to the woman who was buried in the flower stand or whether she was thinking of her friend, Mrs. Vanderstein, is not clear.

"Was Mrs. Vanderstein in the drawing-room at the time of the murder, and if so what was her business there, is the next question where our knowledge fails us. We know she was in that room at some time or other—I knew that the moment I smelt her perfume on the powder puff and note—but whether or no she was there at the moment of the crime we cannot tell. In either case her subsequent proceedings are extraordinary. If she was detained in the house against her will and made her escape by some unknown means, why did she fly to Boulogne, instead of to her own house or to the nearest police station? Why, when she got to Boulogne, did she not communicate with her friends until yesterday? It is true she said she had written previously, but it would have been more natural if she had telegraphed, and if she received

no reply had telegraphed again. Why did she display no anxiety on Miss Turner's account? Her actions seem at present to be inexplicable and strange to the last degree. Had she suddenly gone off her head? That is the most probable solution, to my mind. If so, it may well be that it was she who committed the terrible crime I discovered in Scholefield Avenue, and then, with the mixture of cunning and recklessness common to lunatics of a criminal type, retired to Boulogne to wait till the affair should have blown over. There are, however, several drawbacks to such a theory, and one of them is that it does not account for the black-bearded man, unless he was a lover, and indeed it seems most likely that he was.

"We don't know what was the part he played on Monday night. Perhaps he helped Mrs. Vanderstein to escape more effectually than he did Miss Turner, in spite of his promise to her.

"All we know is that he took the girl out of the house on Tuesday night or Wednesday morning and that they went together to the bank of the canal in Regent's Park, where Matterson came upon them. We know that 'black-beard' carried a heavy spade with him. What for? Not to use it as he did, I think; neither was it to dig a grave with after Miss Turner had been disposed of in some other way. Think, Jennins, there was a cord attached to the handle, and the canal was within a few yards of them. Do those two facts suggest nothing to you? Surely it is obvious that his intention was to throw the young lady into the water, having previously tied the spade to her so as to make sure she would sink. No doubt she guessed what was in his mind, and that was why Matterson saw her defending herself, poor girl, and heard her scream. Such at least is my opinion."

"I shouldn't wonder if you've hit the nail on the head

this time," agreed the inspector. "The question is, what's the next thing to be done?"

"It's high time I followed up a clue contained in the letter purporting to come from Prince Felipe," replied Gimblet. "I should have done so long ago, if I had not waited for Mrs. Vanderstein's version of the affair. You remember a Madame Q. is mentioned as the bearer of the note. Well, who is Madame Q.? I telegraphed early yesterday to Mrs. Vanderstein saying, 'Were you at 13 Scholefield Avenue on Monday night, and who else was present? Letter has been found there apparently addressed to you by Prince F. mentioning Madame Q. Please wire very fully, and give Madame Q.'s full name and address. Very grave matters involved.' If the lady had replied to my wire we should doubtless have been spared a lot of trouble, though we might not have been able to save her life; but, as things are, I propose to try and sift the question of Madame Q.'s identity for myself."

Jennins went away; and Gimblet, after being detained by a short visit from Sidney—who was on his way to catch the eleven o'clock train to Boulogne—also took up his hat and left the house.

A quarter of an hour later he was standing on the doorstep of Mrs. Vanderstein's Grosvenor Street house.

He found, as was natural, a shocked and dislocated household. The cook and Blake were seated in the morning-room, where the cook was flourishing a handkerchief, and reiterating observations to the effect that she had always known something terrible was going to happen ever since the second footman had broken the looking-glass in the pantry; while the young man referred to was standing just outside the door, and putting his head into the room every few minutes to remark defiantly, though with a certain uneasiness, that it wasn't in nature for so tremendous an event to

be brought about by such an insignificant piece of glass as the one he had had the "misfortune" with. From the drawing-room came the penetrating shrillness of Amélie's voice, apparently filling in the newspaper account of the murder, with all the embellishing detail an unshrinkingly gruesome imagination could suggest, for the benefit of the rest of the maids, whose chorusing groans could also be distinguished. But, on the whole, there was more perturbation as to the effect the tragedy would be likely to have on their own futures than distress at the dreadful fate of their mistress; and Gimblet, if he had to listen to much lamentation, found himself also beset with many anxious questions.

It was some minutes before he was able to introduce his own object in coming there; but at last he drew Blake to one side, and asked him if Mrs. Vanderstein had kept a visiting book with a list of the people she called on.

She had done so, and it was produced, but to Gimblet's disappointment contained no name beginning with the letter Q. There were, however, the names of two or three French ladies, and he wondered whether Q were merely a cipher for Gerady or Kerigoet. Blake, cross-questioned, could think of no foreign lady with whom Mrs. Vanderstein was on familiar terms.

Gimblet remembered Amélie's thorough knowledge in the matter of her mistress' correspondence, and called to her to come and speak to him.

"Had Mrs. Vanderstein a friend of your nationality?" he asked. "Was there any French lady whom she knew well, and whose name, perhaps, began with a Q?"

"A lady? No," said Amélie. "A friend? Hardly! Il ne manquait plus que cela! But she was acquainted with a French woman, whose name begins with Q. Without doubt, it is of that Justine you speak."

" Justine ? "

" Eh ! Yes. Justine Querterot. Madame Querterot, as she calls herself, though, for me, I never saw that she had a husband. It is said that he shot himself, the poor man, and I do not see what he could have done better with a wife like that one ! Ah, monsieur, a nasty, bad woman ! "

" There are people like that," Gimblet agreed diplomatically ; " but tell me, how did Mrs. Vanderstein know this Madame Querterot ? "

" She came for a time to *coiffer* Madame, and to rejuvenate her complexion, which needed nothing of the kind, I assure you. But she had the idea to be massaged, and for some months that woman was daily in the house. Never did I comprehend how Mrs. Vanderstein could tolerate her. A woman so vulgar, so familiar, and who never ceased to talk and talk and talk ! "

Amélie spoke with virtuous indignation, as one to whom the gift of silence has been vouchsafed.

" She is a masseuse, then ? "

" Not a real masseuse, though so she calls herself ; but, to say the truth, she is just a hairdresser who tries to make people believe she knows something of the care of the skin. For some reason she appeared to amuse Madame, and I think it was chiefly for that reason that she let her come."

" Did she come every day, and has she been here since Mrs. Vanderstein left home ? "

" For two or three months she came every day," replied Amélie bitterly. " Indeed I thought she was coming always, but only last Monday—the very day Madame went away—I heard la Justine say that it was her final visit ; and, in truth, she has not been here since, I am very happy to say it."

" Ah," said Gimblet. " Well, I shall have to go and

see her. Let me see, you said she is a tall, dark woman, did you not ? "

" But no," cried Amélie, " on the contrary she is short, and has yellow hair in the worst possible taste."

" What makes you dislike this woman so much ? Do you know anything against her, by any chance ? "

But it appeared that Amélie knew nothing against Madame Querterot. Vague accusations and dark charges of a general character were all she had to bring ; and, after listening to a tirade of this kind for a considerable time, Gimblet cut it short by asking for the masseuse's address.

" Your mistress left a letter for her," he said, " which has been sent over to us by the French police. It is of no importance, and contains, I think, only a reference to Madame Querterot's account, but I am anxious to deliver it ; and, as the poor lady had got no further with the address than Madame Q, without your assistance it would have been a matter of some difficulty."

It was unfortunate that the detective should have hit upon this excuse to explain his interrogations, for the idea that even death had not put a stop to intercourse between Mrs. Vanderstein and her enemy nearly suffocated Amélie, whose jealous suspicions woke again at the challenge.

" This is the address, monsieur," she said, as she gave it to him, " but I would not count on finding the bird in the nest. It is in the neighbourhood of Boulogne that you should look for that infamous woman. One of her kind is capable of everything ; and, in my opinion, nothing is more probable than that it is she who is the real assassin of my poor Madame ! A black beard, indeed ! Is she not a hairdresser ? "

Gimblet fled before the storm of words he had

provoked, and hurried to the Pimlico address that he had obtained.

In spite of himself, Amélie's words echoed in his ears: "Is she not a hairdresser?" A black beard was a simple enough disguise, and fair hair may be covered. But he had been told also that the masseuse was a short woman, and height is not so easily simulated. Such were his thoughts as he turned the handle of the shop door.

There was no one inside, and Gimblet had time to remark the empty shelves and forlorn look of the window—which the waxen lady no longer graced with her presence—before, in answer to the rapping of his hand on the counter and his repeated cry of "Shop, please," the door leading to the back room opened and Julie Querterot made her appearance.

It was a sad enough figure she presented to him that day: paler, thinner, more tired-looking than ever. There was a scared look in her eyes now, and black lines under them. She came forward slowly, almost timidly.

"Did you want anything?" she said. "I am afraid our stock is nearly all—sold out."

"Thanks," said Gimblet. "I called to see Madame Querterot—is it possible that I am speaking to her?"

"Oh no," said Julie with a little smile. "I am her daughter. But I fear you cannot see my mother just now. She is—out."

"Never mind," returned Gimblet. "I will wait. Perhaps she will be in by luncheon-time? I have a message for her."

"I do not know when she will be back," said the girl. "Can you not leave the message with me?"

"It is for her own ear," said Gimblet. "If you don't mind, I will wait a little."

He sat down as he spoke, and Julie, after a hesitating glance, went back to the inner room, leaving the door ajar between the two.

Gimblet, left to himself, was surprised to notice again how very few were the articles exposed for sale. Bare as the shop had looked when he first entered, he now saw it to be even emptier than he had thought. A tradesman's almanack on one wall, a picture from an illustrated paper on the other, two or three bottles of hair-wash and a few packets of hair-pins seemed to constitute the whole stock in trade.

Gimblet was still wondering whether the massage was in as bad a way as the hairdressing side of the Querterot business, when a subdued sound coming from the next room drew his attention.

What was it, that sort of low, muffled panting?

The detective got up softly, and stole to the door.

Peeping shamelessly through the crack, he saw that a chair had been drawn up to the table and that Julie sat there with her head bent and resting on her hands. It was from her that the sound came which had caught his ear, for her whole body was shaking with the sobs which she tried in vain to stifle.

Gimblet opened the door and passed boldly through.

"I am so sorry," he said, "to have come at a time when you are unhappy. But won't you tell me all about it? Who knows, I may be able to help you."

At sight of him the girl started up, with a renewed effort to get the better of her grief; but the kind tone of Gimblet's voice put the finishing touch to her emotions: losing all attempt at self-control, she laid her head down on the table before her and gave way to unrestrained and passionate tears.

Gimblet let her weep for a while, then he sat down

near her and tried to comfort her. He took one of her hands and patted it gently, as if she had been a child.

"There, there," he said, "don't cry any more. Tell me what's the matter and let's see if something can't be done about it."

Gradually her tears came more slowly; the convulsive sobs that had shaken her died away, and she sat up and dried her eyes, looking at him from time to time with furtive shyness.

"You are very kind, sir," she said at last, succumbing reluctantly to that feeling of confidence which Gimblet always succeeded in inspiring if he tried. "It was—it was only because you asked to see my mother."

"How's that?"

"She—she—I don't know where she is."

"No? But never mind. You will hear where she has been when she comes home."

"You don't understand. She hasn't been home for four days, and I have no idea when she is coming back. She did not tell me anything."

"Dear me!" Gimblet looked grave. "When do you say you saw her last?"

"It was on Tuesday morning," said Julie. "She came and woke me very early; she seemed to have been out, for she still wore her hat, and in her hand she had a black bag. After that she went away. I heard her moving about for some time, till at last she went downstairs and I heard the front door slam. I jumped out of bed and looked out of the window and saw her going down the street with a big bag in each hand. And I haven't seen or heard anything of her since. But I am sure, oh, I *know* she did not mean to come back!"

"How do you know that?" Gimblet asked.

" I know it from what she said, and from what she did, before she went."

" Won't you tell me ? "

Julie looked at him doubtfully.

" Bert—that is a friend of mine—tried to make me promise not to say anything about it, but I told him I should go to the police if I didn't hear soon. And I feel I must tell some one, for something dreadful may have happened to her," Julie added, half to herself. " Have you anything to do with the police ? " she asked.

" Well, yes, I have, as a matter of fact ; in an indirect way."

" You will know what to do then, if I tell you. Bert doesn't seem to know what to do ; he only rages. Well, I think my mother has gone away for good, because, before she went, she got a man to come to the house and buy nearly every portable thing in it. There is hardly anything left besides these chairs and table, and my bed upstairs. Soon after she had gone they came and took away the things."

" Did she leave you no money ? "

" No, but she left me the house, you see ; only the rent is due and I have nothing to pay it with. And she told me to collect any bills that were due for her services, and that she made me a present of the money. So when she was gone I looked in the ledger and found that everything owing to her had been paid up during the last few days, except one account. It was that of Mrs. Vanderstein, the poor lady who was murdered at Boulogne yesterday, as perhaps you have seen in the papers ? "

Gimblet inclined his head gravely, and she went on.

" My mother used to go to massage the complexion of Mrs. Vanderstein, and the amount owing was large, over twenty pounds. I was grateful that such a sum

should be given to me; but, when I saw the next morning that the lady had disappeared, I made sure it was because she was unable to pay her bills, and it seemed likely that my mother had known this when she was so generous to me. I made sure I should never see a penny of that money, and I was in despair, as I didn't know what to do about the rent, or even how to live in the meantime. I went up to Mrs. Vanderstein's house to see if she had really gone, and a kind old gentleman told me the bill would be paid all the same. That was a great comfort, but I knew it would not be for some time, at any rate, and perhaps not till I was starving. It did not really matter so very much," Julie added loyally, "for I am anxious to enter a religious sisterhood, and they will take me, I am sure, even if I have nothing to bring them. But I can't bear to go to them as a beggar, and I wish, I wish she hadn't left me quite destitute without any warning," she concluded, her eyes filling with tears again.

"Then what did she wake you up to say, early on Tuesday morning?"

"I told you she had a bag in her hand? She took some clothes out of it and gave them to me. She told me to burn them and that she would explain why when she came back. But she said I might keep the linings to make myself petticoats. Such fine petticoats would be no use to me. Still, it was kind of her. And then she took out this and gave it to me to take care of"—Julie put her hand to her neck and pulled out from under her blouse a long string of enormous pearls. "She said that one of her customers had asked her to look after them while she was travelling," continued the girl, lifting the necklace over her head and holding it out to Gimblet. "I don't know if they are real, though she told me to be very careful

of them and to wear them always. But I think if they had been real she would not have left them."

Gimblet took the necklace without a word. He was for the moment incapable of speaking.

"That was all my mother said to me," went on Julie, "but she seemed very pleased about something; and at the same time excited. When I looked out of the window and saw her walking away, she was wearing clothes I had never seen before; they must have been quite new. They were simple, certainly, just a coat and skirt and a small hat; but they were beautifully made and fitted her so well, not at all like what she generally wore. There is something about expensive clothes that makes people look so different. I should hardly have known her if it had not been for a way she has of walking. I could only see the top of her head, but the hat was a very smart one, with a beautiful osprey in it. Somehow she had the air of a person going to a wedding, and I can't help thinking that perhaps it was her own wedding she was going to. She may have married some one above us in station and not have wanted him to know of my existence. That is what I think, but Bert says not."

Gimblet cleared his throat. "I wonder," he said, "if you would mind showing me the clothes you spoke of that your mother gave you before she left."

"I'm afraid I can't," said Julie. "I—you see I had no money—I sold them to a second-hand clothes shop in Victoria Street. Bert wanted to see them too. He thinks my mother must have had some special reason for saying they were to be burnt, but I don't believe she would have told me I could keep the linings if they had been infectious."

"What were they like?" Gimblet asked. It needed all his self-control to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

"Two beautiful white evening dresses," said Julie, "and two opera cloaks of red and mauve silk all covered with lovely embroidery and lace. Of course I could never have worn them and it seemed a pity to cut them up. I simply couldn't have burned them. The shop only gave me five pounds for the lot, but that will keep me for some time till I have decided what to do. Still, Bert says I ought not to have sold them."

"By the way," said Gimblet, "who is Bert?"

The girl flushed. "He's just a boy I know," she said. "He used to go to school with me, and he is always good to me. I shouldn't like to annoy him or to hurt his feelings, and I ought not to have spoken of him, because when he advised me not to go to the police, and I wouldn't promise, he said that I should see that harm would come of it. And so I told him that if my mother came back and blamed me for having spoken of her absence, as he seems to think she would, I would say that he had urged me not to. And then he got quite angry and told me to do as I pleased, but not to mix him up in it, and so I said of course I'd never mention his name if he didn't like; but now I've done it." She stopped, breathless.

"Well, give Bert a message from me," said Gimblet; "tell him I agree with him so far, and think you have no need to go to the police yet awhile. But you had better not tell him I have anything to do with them, as he seems to dislike them so much. Shall you see him soon?"

"Yes, I expect he will come this evening when he leaves off work; he generally does. And I think I shan't tell him anything about you. Really, it isn't his business and I don't like being always lectured."

"I think you are quite right," said Gimblet. "Now one question. Have you any idea as to the man with

whom you think your mother may have gone off? Had you any suspicion before that she was thinking of marrying again?"

The girl hesitated a moment. "No," she said, "I have no idea at all who it could be."

CHAPTER XXIII

GIMBLET was late for the inquest, which had been fixed for two o'clock. By the time he arrived the evidence of Higgs and the policeman he had fetched, and that of Brampton, the artist, and the house agents' clerk had been already taken, and there only remained his own and the doctor's to be heard.

Nothing new was brought to light, and the jury returned a verdict of "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown."

Gimblet did not judge it expedient to disclose the theories he had formed on the subject of the crime. As he walked away from the house in the company of Jennins, whom he had found there when he arrived, the inspector said to him:

"An old-clothes dealer in Victoria Street has communicated with us. They have bought what they think, from the published description, to be the dresses and cloaks worn by Mrs. Vanderstein and Miss Turner on Monday night. I am going to get that French maid of theirs to go down to the place with me and see if the people are right in their assumption. They say they bought the things from a young woman who gave an address in Pimlico and the name of Julie Querterot. Can she be the Madame Q. of the note? If she is, it is strange that she should not give a false name; but everything about this case is mysterious."

"It is not she," said Gimblet, "it was her mother.

I have just been to their house and seen her. As for mysteries, there is only one left as far as I am concerned, and that is the whereabouts of West, and the question whether he has not by this time exchanged his disguise of a black beard for another in which it will be harder to identify him. Everything else, I think, is quite clear, with the exception of a few trifling details, and I do not think it will be long before we may hope to lay our hands on Mr. West himself."

Gimblet refused, however, to impart his lately acquired information to Jennins, telling him, much to the inspector's disgust, that he would know all about it soon enough.

"And a tangled web you'll find it, Jennins," said he.

They were interrupted by a messenger, who informed Jennins that Miss Turner was conscious and anxious to make a statement.

Gimblet and the inspector went together to the hospital, where they found Barbara looking very much better than the day before. She was recovering wonderfully, they were told, but must not excite herself more than could be avoided. Indeed, she would not have been allowed to see them yet, if she had not been fretting so much to tell her story that it was thought best to let her do it. She must not, however, be made aware of the death of her friend if it were possible to conceal it from her for the next few days.

She greeted the two men with a feeble smile. "I hear that I was rescued by one of your men," she said to Jennins, "and I am more grateful to him than I can say, though I do not remember very much after I realised that that man was trying to tie his spade round my neck."

"It's lucky you were seen in time," replied Jennins. "We don't want to bother you to-day, but at the same

time we are, of course, anxious to hear anything you can tell us about the scoundrel you were with."

"Oh, I want to tell you all about it so that you may be able to catch him—and the woman too. I suppose you haven't got them yet?"

Jennins shook his head.

"I thought perhaps Mrs. Vanderstein had been able to put you on the track. How glad I am that she escaped. I was afraid—but no matter now. Has she told you how she managed to get away?"

"Mrs. Vanderstein went abroad immediately," said Gimblet evasively; "we have not heard any details from her yet. But will you not tell us your adventures from the beginning? How was it you found yourselves in Scholefield Avenue?"

Barbara looked at him blankly. "Scholefield Avenue," she repeated, "where is that?"

"The house in which you were imprisoned is there," said Gimblet; "have you forgotten? You went there with Mrs. Vanderstein on Monday night after the opera. I want you to tell us why you went to it."

"I didn't know where it was," said Barbara, "but I don't think I can tell you why we went. I don't think Mrs. Vanderstein would like me to do that."

"As you wish," replied Gimblet; "but this will show you that I already know something of your friend's private affairs." He took out the sheet of notepaper bearing the arms of Targona, and handed it to her.

"She gave you this!" cried the girl, and as Gimblet remained silent: "Then she cannot mind my speaking of it. Yes, it is true that we went to that house to meet Prince Felipe, but I don't know if he came there or not."

"No, he did not go."

"Then the whole thing was false! I thought so at

the beginning, but afterwards I was not sure. It was on Monday morning that Mrs. Vanderstein spoke to me about it. For a week she had been looking strange : excited, pleased—I don't know what exactly—happier, younger, somehow different from her usual look. And on Monday she came to my room and told me, blushing and smiling, that it was her happiness to be loved by Prince Felipe of Targona, and that in all probability she was going to marry him. They had only seen each other in the distance, she said, but it had been love at first sight for both of them, and she was so happy, so happy ! And wouldn't I say I was glad ? I asked her how she knew what he felt for her, if they had never met, and she said she had had letters from him and had written to him herself, and that she was going to meet him that very night after the opera, at the house of a friend of his. She said they could not meet in public, or at his hotel, or in her own home, as he was surrounded by his suite, and his mother, who was also with him, watched his every movement, so that all his comings and goings were seen and marked.

"They were staying at Fianti's Hotel just opposite to us in Grosvenor Street, you know, so it would have been rather difficult for the Prince to come to our house without being noticed. It was intended that he should marry for political reasons, and at any sign of his affections being bestowed on a private individual an outcry would have been raised, which would have been hard to ignore. It was Prince Felipe's plan, so Mrs. Vanderstein told me, that they should be married quietly and that he should then abdicate ; to which less objection would be made when it was known that he was irretrievably disposed of from a matrimonial point of view. The whole story appeared to me so improbable and fantastic that I couldn't help laughing at it, which offended my friend very much, and in

order to convince me she finally showed me some of the Prince's letters, including the one you have there. I could not doubt any longer after I had seen them, though I was surprised and, I must say, shocked to hear that the go-between in the affair and the bearer of all the notes was a Frenchwoman, a hairdresser employed by Mrs. Vanderstein, and also, it seemed, by one of the suite of Prince Felipe.

" When I heard that Mrs. Vanderstein had no idea where the house to which she was to go that night was situated, but had left all details to Madame Querterot and the Prince, I tried to convince her of the folly of such an arrangement, but nothing I could say had any effect. At last I told her that I should accompany her on this escapade ; and, though she didn't like the idea and even grew quite angry with me about it, I stuck to my point, and was so firm on the subject that in the end she gave in and said I could come if I liked. It was, all the same, with serious misgivings that I set forth with her that evening for Covent Garden, where we were first to attend the gala performance. We had hardly entered the theatre when Mrs. Vanderstein told me to run back and tell the motor not to come to fetch us. We were to go away in a carriage sent by the Prince, she said.

" I was too much worried to enjoy the opera. I don't know whether Mrs. Vanderstein did or not, but she kept looking at her watch and fidgeting, so I think her thoughts were elsewhere. Before the last act was nearly over we left the box and went down into the hall, which was nearly empty, and told a man to call Mr. Targon's carriage, for so it appeared the Prince was to be alluded to on this occasion. In a few minutes a brougham drove up, drawn by a dun coloured horse, which dished badly and had an odd white blaze across its nose and one eye I noticed, too, that it was driven

by a very odd-looking man, who wore a hat much too large for him crammed down over his eyes and a great scarf wrapped round his neck and high over his chin and ears ; though even so I could see that he wore a beard, which is, to say the least of it, unusual in a coachman."

" One moment," Jennins interrupted ; " do you think you could recognise the horse, Miss Turner, if you should see him again ? "

" I am nearly sure I should," Barbara replied. " There can't be many with a blaze like that. I am more sure of it than I am of the driver. He drove very badly," she went on, " pulling up under the arch with a jerk and throwing up his hands, each of which clutched at a rein, nearly over his head. ' Surely there is some mistake,' I said. ' Are you from Mr. Targon ? ' ' I am from Mr. Targon,' he answered hoarsely, ' but I think there is a mistake, as you say ; I was to fetch one lady, not two.' ' Oh, that's all right,' said Mrs. Vanderstein hurriedly. ' Jump in, Barbara.' And she got into the brougham herself, so that I had no choice but to follow her, and we drove off.

" Oh dear, how badly that man drove ! Luckily there was hardly any traffic about, but we bumped into three things before we got to the top of Regent Street, and went over the curb at the corners I don't know how often. Once the carriage stopped and the driver leant down and called through the window that he had orders to fetch one lady, and that I must get out. This I absolutely refused to do, and by this time Mrs. Vanderstein was so much alarmed by the reckless way in which he drove that I don't think she would have allowed me to leave her even if I had wished to do so. After a heated dispute a small crowd began to gather round us, and the coachman seeing, I fancy, the shadow of an approaching policeman, suddenly

abandoned the contest, and whipping up his horse we lurched forward again as the animal started with a bound.

"It was a long drive, and towards the end of it I lost all notion of direction and had no idea where we were going. At last, with a final bump and jolt, we drove in at the gate of a little house, which seemed to stand back from the road in a tiny garden, and pulled up with a jerk before a flight of steps, at the top of which a door was flung open the moment we stopped, and I recognised the figure of Madame Querterot standing back from it in the half light of the passage.

"We got out, and Mrs. Vanderstein, who is timid driving at any time, began to abuse the man in a very angry tone. She had been thoroughly frightened, poor dear, and had sat holding my hand with a white face all the way, as I could see from time to time in the light of a passing lamp. 'What do you mean by driving like that?' she called out from the pavement. 'I think you are drunk. A nice thing, indeed. I shall complain of you, do not fear. It is most disgraceful to be in such a state. Never, never have I been driven like that! It is a wonder we were not all killed!' The man flicked at the horse and drove away, but Mrs. Vanderstein was so angry with him that she actually made as if to follow. She only went a step or two, however, and then with a laugh turned back, and we went up the steps, into the house.

"We were received by Madame Querterot, looking, I must say, more tidy than usual, in a neat black dress and a large apron, put on, I suppose, in keeping with her part of parlourmaid. I was struck by the strange expression on her face when she first caught sight of me, and she murmured something to the effect that Mrs. Vanderstein had promised to come alone; but

my friend, who was still flushed from her encounter with the coachman, did not answer her at all and marched on with her chin in the air. Madame Querterot recovered her usual amiability in a moment, and with many smiles and blandishments conducted us up to the drawing-room, where she left us, saying that His Highness had not yet arrived.

"There we waited for what seemed a long time; twenty minutes perhaps, or half an hour. My friend was very nervous and could not sit still, but walked up and down, up and down, restlessly, the whole time. Now she would plump down on a sofa and arrange herself in a graceful attitude; a minute later she would jump to her feet and run to the looking-glass to pat her curls into place, or dab her nose with powder. 'How do I look?' she asked me more than once, and hardly seemed to hear me when I answered her.

"At last there was a slight noise downstairs; the front door shut, and I could catch the mumble of voices talking low. After what seemed again an interminable delay the door opened and Madame Querterot came in. 'If Mademoiselle will come with me into another room for a short time,' said she. 'His Highness has just arrived.' I only hesitated a second. There was such an imploring look in Mrs. Vanderstein's eyes that I could not refuse to go, much as I disapproved of the whole thing. I took her hand, and kissed her encouragingly, and then left the room without a word; for indeed there was something pathetic about her emotion, and I was too much moved by it myself to trust my voice.

"Madame Querterot led me down to a small back room that seemed to be a library, and left me, shutting the door behind her. I heard feet ascending the stairs, the drawing-room door open and shut, and then all was still for a moment.

"Suddenly, however, there came a noise from above. Something seemed to have been knocked over, then came a sound of running footsteps and finally a dragging noise as if a heavy object were being pulled across the floor overhead. I started up in alarm. What was happening upstairs? Surely there was something wrong! Without waiting to think, I rushed into the hall and tore upstairs and in at the drawing-room door. I found myself confronted by a tall man with a thick black beard and a pale, blotchy face. Behind him at the further end of the room I caught a glimpse of Mrs. Vanderstein, apparently lying on a sofa, and Madame Querterot bending over her. 'What is it. Is she ill?' I cried. 'Take her away, take her away,' exclaimed Madame Querterot, looking up over her shoulder, and before I had time to speak again I was hustled out of the room by the tall man and dragged downstairs again to the library. I was so infuriated at his daring to touch me that I could scarcely speak, but I managed to stammer again: 'Is she ill? Is Mrs. Vanderstein ill?' 'She is not feeling quite well,' he replied, 'she will be best without you.'

"I looked at him curiously. I had seen Prince Felipe, and this was not he. Indeed I thought I recognised the driver of the brougham. He was a strange-looking man, dressed in ordinary day clothes, and I noticed with astonishment that he wore thick brown leather gloves on both hands. 'I think she will be better with me,' I said defiantly, and advanced towards the door, but he barred the way. 'You must stay here,' he said. 'Must!' I said; 'what do you mean? Let me go this instant.' He didn't answer, but just stood with his back to the door, grinning in a foolish way. 'Let me out, let me out,' I exclaimed, on the point of tears by this time, I am afraid. 'Let me out or—or—I'll set fire to the house!'

" I caught up my scarf and held it towards the gas, but the man leapt forward and, before I knew what he was doing, had turned out the flame altogether, leaving us in the dark. As I still stood, bewildered, I heard the door open and in an instant he had vanished through it and the key was turned in the lock outside.

" This was followed by the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and in the silence that succeeded it is no exaggeration to say that the noise of my pulses throbbing in my ears sounded as loud as the tramp of a whole army on the march. I felt my way to a chair, and for a time sat in a trembling silence, shaken and unstrung by terror the most unnerving, if of the vaguest nature.

" Why would they not let me go to Mrs. Vanderstein if she was ill? What was the matter with her? Why had Madame Querterot looked as she did when she saw me on the doorstep? What was she doing, kneeling by the sofa? And, above all, what was the meaning of the man's behaviour to me? It was, I think, the touch of his hand, as he dragged me downstairs, that took away my courage altogether.

" I sat for a long while, immovable in the darkness. From time to time sounds came from the room above, but they did not convey any meaning to me. At last I grew calmer, and indignation began to take the place of my fears. I got up and moved about the room, feeling my way as I went. In this manner I soon had an idea of the position and character of the furniture, even of the fire-place and the coal scuttle; and I must have blacked my fingers nicely in the process. I had a wild notion that it might be useful to me to know where the poker was, though I had no definite idea what I would do with it. Still, in one way or another I was determined to escape from this imprisonment. What did they mean by shutting me in this room? They must, they should, let me out!

"I began to cry for help. I felt my way to the door and beat against it with my hands, but no answer came. Then I had a brilliant thought—the room was on the ground floor, surely I could get out of the window. I reached it and tried to open it, but it was stiff and heavy. In spite of all my efforts I could not raise the sash. I groped for the poker again and, standing back for fear of the splintering glass, I aimed a blow at the place where I knew the window to be and heard with delight the crash of a shattered pane. Even as I delivered the blow, it struck me as curious that no light came into the room from the night outside; and, thrusting the poker through the hole I had broken, I found to my dismay that there were strong wooden shutters beyond it. But the noise I had made seemed to have attracted some attention at last, for I heard a door open and the sound of some one running down the stairs.

"A moment later the key was turned, and the door opened just enough to let in the tall man, who shut it behind him again as soon as he was inside. He had a little electric torch, which he turned in my direction, so that the glare blinded me and I couldn't see him at all. 'It's no good making all this row, Miss Turner,' he said, 'no sort of earthly, kicking up such a shindy as a young lady like you ought to be ashamed to raise. Besides,' he said, and now there was something in his tone that turned me sick, 'it isn't *safe*. Do you understand? It is not *safe*. Now, you see I don't mean you any harm or I simply shouldn't bother to warn you. But no, I like the look of you, and I'm sorry to see you in this house, where I tell you again it's dangerous to stay. But be a sensible young lady and do as I tell you, and I'm blowed if I don't help you to escape when the time comes. What do you say to that? I can't say fairer, can I?'

"I suppose you will think me a dreadful coward, but there was something about the man which frightened me horribly. I think it was that he seemed to be himself in the extremity of fear. How I gathered that impression I am not sure. It may have been the low, hurried agitation of his voice, or the way in which his hand was shaking, so that the light behind which he was concealed danced and wavered between us like a will-o'-the-wisp; or perhaps it was the mere telepathic infection of fear. At all events I was ready to agree to anything he said, and jumped at the idea of escape. 'I'll do anything, I'll be as quiet as a mouse,' I cried beseechingly, 'if you'll only let me go away.' 'That's right,' he said approvingly. 'I'll help you, never fear. And to show that I mean it,' he went on, 'here's a change of clothes for you. You'd never escape in that white and red costume, you know.' He threw down a bundle on the table. 'Make haste and get into these togs, and let me take away your own things. I'll leave you the lamp to change by, but you must look sharp, and mind you change every single thing, down to your shift.'

"So saying he put down the lamp and left the room again. No sooner was the door shut than I caught up the lamp and ran to the window. Peering through the glass, I tried to make out the fastening of the shutters and to see if I could get at it by putting my arm through the broken pane; but it was quite out of reach and I realised that I could do nothing without smashing more glass, and I did not dare do that now. So I put down the lamp again, and fell to changing my clothes as the man had suggested.

"They were horrible clothes he had brought, and it made me sick to put them on; but I felt he was right in saying that I could not escape in my evening dress. So, though I didn't see why I should change all my

under things, I thought there might be some reason for that also, and anyhow I think I was too much frightened not to do as I was told. It was soon done, but not too soon, for without so much as a knock the wretch walked in again as I was fastening the last button of the shabby coat over a chemise so rough that my skin prickled all over. He looked at me with some satisfaction. 'You must alter your hair,' he said; 'do it up tight and plain, so that it won't show more than can be helped.'

"With that, he gathered up my clothes and went away, taking the lamp with him this time, and I saw no more of him for a long while. There was no need to twist my hair up so hurriedly, for after that was done I sat down and waited for what seemed like days. It was terrible, waiting, waiting, waiting in the darkness, which my fears peopled with invisible presences, so that I found myself holding my breath lest the door handle should turn again, and some one, or some thing, enter unheard by me. At the thought, I got up and dragged a heavy chair across the room, where I sat down on it with my back against the door, my anxiety to get out quite forgotten and overwhelmed in the awful possibility of not being certain whether or not I were alone.

"If only Mrs. Vanderstein had still been with me. But, believe me, it was not only selfishly that I longed for her: the vision of her, ill, and no doubt in danger equal to mine as an inmate of this dreadful house, sat on me like a nightmare; and, if I was frightened by the peril of my own position, I trembled still more at the danger to which my friend might be exposed. Why was the man afraid? It was the recollection of his terror that cowed me, so that I sat there rigid, paralysed by the fear of I knew not what. From time to time noises broke the silence, the noise of people

moving in the room above; and presently some one descended the stairs and approached the door against which I crouched.

"A violent trembling fit seized me and my teeth chattered so convulsively that I could hardly hear the footsteps outside; but they passed on, and I heard a door opened at the end of the passage. A minute later they returned, sounding loud on the linoleum of the hall and muffled as they went up the stairs; only to come down again in a few moments. Over and over again this process was repeated: some one apparently walking down the stairs, down the passage, and through a door at the back of the house, then retracing his steps, and in a minute or two beginning all over again. This went on, I should think, for more than an hour, and then after an interval I heard two people come down and go to the door; soon it was gently shut and only one pair of feet returned.

"Presently another noise began—rather a comforting, familiar noise—the sound of sweeping and brushing, both on the stairs and in the room overhead. It seemed as if a housemaid were about, beginning the morning's work, for by now I could see through a tiny space in the shutters that it was daylight. I called out once: 'Is there anyone there?' at which the noise of sweeping ceased, and a warning 'Hush' was breathed at me through the keyhole, close by my ear. After a time all these sounds stopped altogether. The sweeper passed my door again, and again went through the door at the end of the passage. This time it was closed with a snap of the lock, and then silence settled on the house. I don't know how long I sat there without hearing a sound. I think I must have dozed. I know I began to feel so stiff and tired that fear seemed a secondary consideration, and I didn't care what happened any more. Heaven knows how long he left me there,

dozing and waking, perhaps for hours, perhaps for days. You know more about that than I do.

"It was after what seemed like a week that the storm began. It was that which definitely roused me from the sort of stupor into which I had fallen, and stirred me to rack my brains again for some means of escape. It was dreadfully hot in that little room; the atmosphere was close and stifling till it seemed to weigh one down with an unbearable oppression, and if it had not been for the glass I had broken—through which an occasional breath of air penetrated by way of a crack in the shutter—I suppose it would have been even worse than it was. From time to time I had been conscious of the distant rumbling of thunder, and hoped dimly that it would clear the air, for before the storm actually burst my head was like to split; and it was with a certain relief that I heard the first large drops of rain begin to fall. Soon afterwards there was a tremendous clap of thunder.

"I was appallingly hungry, and wondered if I were being purposely left to die of starvation. With a vague idea that I might find something edible I began feeling about again around the room and considering the possibility, if the worst came to the worst, of eating my shoes, as I had heard of starving men being forced to do. But I was not hungry enough for that yet, and besides I wasn't sure if the soles of my satin slippers were of leather, or only *papier mâché*. On the table my fingers came across a stump of pencil, and that distracted my thoughts for a little while. I had to feel it all over before I was sure what it was; it was the point that made me almost certain, and I began at once to ask myself whether I could not by some means send a message to the outside world. I could think of no way of doing so, however, and even if I could have, I had nothing to write on. Then the

idea came to me of writing on the wall. I thought to myself that if the man meant to play me false, at least I could leave a token of my presence, which possibly at some future day might lead to the punishment of these people. I knew there were pictures on the walls, and feeling my way to the fire-place I lifted up one hanging above it, so that by inserting my hand under the frame I could write on that part of the wall-paper which, as far as I could tell, lay behind.

" I had only written a few words, when the key was turned and the door opened. A rumbling of thunder had prevented my hearing the sound of approaching feet, and I had only just time to let the picture fall back into its place and to move a few steps away from the mantelpiece before the black-bearded man entered the room. Fortunately, the chair I had pushed against the door retarded its opening for a moment, or he would have seen what I was doing. ' Come,' he said, taking hold of my arm, ' now is the time for you to escape to a place of safety.'

" Without further words he led me into the hall, and along it to the front door. Here we paused, while he opened it very cautiously and peered out. For my part, I was more nervous with regard to dangers that might lurk in the house behind us ; but his inspection of the outside world seemed to satisfy him, for picking up, to my astonishment, a large garden spade that was leaning against the wall he opened the door wide and we passed through it together. I cannot tell you with what feelings of gladness and thankfulness I hastened down the steps and out into the street, nor with what joy I felt my unrestrained feet splashing into the puddles, and the free air of the night blow freshly on my face. We had gone some hundreds of yards and turned more than one corner before I dared speak. ' What has happened to my friend ? ' I then said ; ' has she escaped

too?' 'She has gone,' he answered evasively, and still quickened his pace till I was half running to keep up with him.

"It was wild weather to be abroad: the storm was still at its height and the flashes of lightning and the thunder claps succeeded each other with increasing frequency; rain was falling in torrents, the roads and pavements were like seething rivers, and the gutters ran a foot deep at the edge of the kerb, as I discovered by stepping into one when we crossed the street. There was not a soul to be seen except the black-cloaked figure of an occasional policeman, and whenever we approached one of these my companion gripped my arm more tightly, and wheeled away in a new direction. It was thus, with many turns and by circuitous routes, that we progressed on our way. And, though I asked more than once where we were going, not another word did I extract from the black-bearded man; and I soon fell the more readily into a like silence, as the rapid pace at which we walked left me little breath for speech.

"In this manner, and after we had hurried along for at least half an hour, we made our way into an enclosure, which I guessed to be Regent's Park. The first elation caused by leaving the house where I had been imprisoned was wearing off and I had time to ask myself whither I was being led, receiving in reply no very comforting assurances. Was I being taken from one place of incarceration to another? I wondered, and at the thought I tried to shake off the hand that lay upon my arm. 'If you will let me go now,' I said timidly, 'I shall be all right by myself. I shall never forget that you helped me to escape, but now, if you don't mind, I—I had rather be alone.' But I got no answer, nor did the clutch on my arm relax. In a fresh panic I made up my mind that the next time we saw a policeman I would scream for help.

"It was not many minutes after I had taken this decision that my companion paused in his rapid walk; and after looking about him doubtfully seemed to recognise some landmark in the darkness, and came to a sudden halt. 'Can you get over these railings?' he said. We had been following the line of an iron fence that bordered the path, and I could feel rather than see that it reached above the height of my waist and was ornamented with spikes. 'I think it is hardly possible,' I replied; 'but why should I get over?' He did not answer, but seemed to consider. 'I think I can lift you over,' he said at length, and before I could object he had his arms around me, and with a tremendous effort swung me up in the air and across the railings. 'Now you must help me,' he said, holding tightly to my arm as I landed safely on the other side. And partly by my help, partly by holding on to a tree that leant up against the fence near by, he managed to scramble over.

"Now, by the roughness of the ground under my feet, I knew we were on the grass, even before a flash of lightning showed me that we had wandered away from the fence and were standing on the top of an embankment, at the bottom of which I caught sight of a high wooden paling. With instinctive reluctance, I hung back as my companion began to descend the bank, tugging me in his wake. At the bottom of the hill we came to the high wall, which we followed for a little way, and presently stopped before an opening through which I saw the gleam of water. 'We must get through here,' said the man. 'There's plenty of room where these two boards have been torn off.' There was, as he said, a gap where some planks were missing and only the cross pieces of wood remained. 'Why should we go this way?' I asked again, full of misgivings. 'Where are you taking me?' 'Where you will be

safe,' said he. 'Come on,' and stepping before me through the gap he dragged me roughly after him.

"Then, for the first time, he suddenly removed the hand that all this while had clutched me by the arm; and as I stood there, bewildered, not knowing what to do with my freedom, the scene was lighted up by a tremendous flash, brighter than any that had gone before, and I saw that he was fumbling with a cord that was attached to the handle of the spade he carried. His arms were stretched towards me, and before the light had faded from the sky I realised that he was trying to throw the end of the rope round my neck, passing it from one hand to the other as he did so.

"Perhaps I leapt too suddenly to a conclusion, or perhaps—as I think more likely—my understanding was quickened by fear, but in that instant I became as certain of his intention as though he had explained it to me in every detail. He was going to drown me in the canal, first tying the heavy spade to me to make sure that I should sink, never to rise again. I screamed aloud and pushed him away with all my strength. On that steeply sloping bank he was at a disadvantage, the rain had made it slippery, and for a minute I frustrated his purpose. Then came another flash, and by it the man seemed to catch sight of something behind me, which at the same time horrified and infuriated him, for I saw his expression change, and with a snarl of frightened rage he lifted up the spade and hit at me with it. Somehow I managed to jump aside, but I saw him raise it for another blow, and after that —after that—I can remember no more."

Barbara's story was finished. It had been told slowly, and at intervals the girl lay back with closed eyes, too weak to continue. But on any proposal to defer her account to another day she had roused

herself, and proceeded with it resolutely till she came to the end.

The shadows had time to grow long during the telling of it, so that when at length, after they had finally taken leave of the invalid and issued forth once more from the doors of the hospital, the two men found themselves again in the open air it was already dinner-time.

"Come back with me, Jennins, and have something to eat," said Gimblet, as they walked away. "There is sure to be food of sorts ready for me at the flat."

But Jennins was bound elsewhere.

"I'm going to have a try at hunting out that horse," he said. "Miss Turner thinks she'd know it again and, as she says, the number of dun coloured beasts with a decided dish and a peculiar crooked blaze of white over the nose and one eye must be more or less limited. Then, you remember, she thinks the driver was no other than our friend West, and if, after he had set the ladies down in Scholefield Avenue, he was less than half an hour in making his reappearance, one may argue that the stables were not half a mile away from No. 13. Don't you think I am right?"

"I think your reasoning is perfectly sound," said Gimblet. "You ought to be able to find out something about the horse without much trouble; and incidentally, I hope, about the driver. Let me know as soon as you have news. For my part I will try and see if I can't get some information about him also. In the meantime, I've eaten nothing since breakfast, and exhausted nature calls. I'm off to get some dinner."

"I suppose," Jennins called after him, "from what you said to me this afternoon, that you have ascer-

tained that this Madame Querterot is beyond our reach for the moment ? "

" Yes," said Gimblet.

" And do you think the girl, her daughter, has any idea as to the woman's whereabouts ? "

" No," said Gimblet gently, " I am sure she has not."

In the flat Gimblet found a telegram awaiting him. It was from Boulogne, and ran as follows :

" Murdered woman not my aunt Mrs. Vanderstein or anyone known to me there is no clue to her identity.

" SIDNEY."

Gimblet crumpled it up and flung it into a waste-paper basket.

" A pity to squander five shillings," he murmured, " in telling me what I already knew."

Then he hastened hungrily to the dining-room.

After a hearty meal he felt considerably better, and when he presently pushed back his chair and strolled over to the open window he was ready and eager for more work. His mind, which had been busy during the meal with attempts to devise a plan that should bring him to closer quarters with the person he most desired to meet, that should cause the phantom figure of Mr. West of the black beard to materialise and become a solid form discernible to the naked eye and capable of wearing handcuffs, had not yet furnished him with a method by which this desirable object might be attained.

" Surely," he said to himself, " I must be able to trace Madame Querterot's meetings with this man. It is impossible that she can have been on such terms of intimacy with him without some one knowing it."

He looked at his watch, helped himself to a sweet from a box which stood on the shelf, and decided to go down to Pimlico and see if he could not find out something more from Julie. It was half-past nine, but she was not likely to have gone to bed yet, and he wanted a specimen of her mother's handwriting.

He went out and took a taxi to Warwick Square, where he dismissed it, and pursued his way on foot.

It was quite dark by now, with the soft blue darkness of summer, for the weather had turned warm again and the sun had gone down in a clear sky. There were plenty of people about, as it was Saturday night; many a small coin was being carried snug in its earner's pocket that would no longer be lying there in a couple of hours' time, and the tills of the publicans were already flooded with the rise of the weekly tide.

As he drew near the little shop in the gloomy, sordid little street, the door of it opened suddenly and a man came out and walked rapidly away. After a few steps he paused; and, turning, gazed for a moment longingly back at the window—from which a pale light shone forth, so that the pavement beneath it was bathed in a gentle radiance—before he swung round once more and made off up the street. It happened that, as he stood for that instant, hesitating perhaps whether or no to return and make a final appeal to the girl he worshipped, the light of the street lamp fell full upon his white, haggard face; and Gimblet, with a start, experienced the surprise of his life, as he realised that he and Bert had met before.

Everything was clear to him now, and, with a sigh of something between relief and regret, he abandoned his proposed visit to Julie and went about the ordering of more important business.

. . . . .

An hour later, Albert Tremmels, clerk to Messrs. Ennidge and Pring, house agents, was arrested in his lodgings for the murders of Mrs. Vanderstein and Madame Querterot, and for the attempted murder of Miss Turner.

CHAPTER XXIV

BERT offered no resistance to the officers of the law. Indeed, after the first moment, he showed a kind of relief at his arrest, and went with his captors almost gladly.

"I knew you'd get me sooner or later," he said, although warned that his words would be used against him, "and it's best to get it over. Julie won't ever forgive me, let alone have anything to do with me, so what have I got to live for? I can't go on like this; no one could. Still, mind you, I'm not so much to blame as you think, and it's my belief any one of you chaps would have done the same as I did, in my place."

Bert had always been ready to justify himself.

He was willing enough to confess, to the police, to the prison chaplain, to anyone. He showed, indeed, considerable satisfaction, not to say pride, in the interest his story excited, and was not a little annoyed with Gimblet when he found there was practically nothing he could tell the detective of which he was not already aware. Bert did not dilate so much on his love for Julie, the one real thing about him and the innocent incentive of all his crimes.

It is perhaps best not to give the exact words in which he poured forth the history of the dark deeds in which he had been concerned, but to offer to the reader a *résumé* of his tale in so far as it was corroborated by the evidence.

Albert Tremmel's father was a West End dairyman

who had the misfortune to marry above him, as the saying is. He had a small shop in Hanover Street and carried on a profitable business, but his wife despised it from the first, and refused to allow their only child to assist her husband when he became old enough to do so. She wished him to be a clerk, and, as she had a way of getting what she wanted, young Bert at the age of eighteen had entered, in that capacity, the office of Messrs. Ennidge and Pring, house and estate agents. He was then, as later, a cadaverous, unpleasant-looking youth, with a surly, combative temper and a strongly marked tendency to look on most people as his natural enemies. This in itself did not bring him friends, and he made matters worse as often as he could by adopting a dictatorial manner of speech and the habit of pointing out to comparative strangers his opinion that they erred in thinking they knew their own business. He would also mention their duty as another thing they were ignorant of. This line of conversation he varied by assuring them that if it were true, as they would have him believe, that they knew both better in any case than he did, it was still more to be regretted that they should mismanage the one and fail to do the other.

Boys of his own age frankly refused to have anything to do with him, and he found his most congenial surroundings at a Socialistic Club, where all the members shared his disapproval of the world in general, and descanted as much as they pleased on the shameful conduct and character of those who were not of their own way of thinking. Here all ranks and parts of the community were equally denounced, and if one could hardly find words strong enough to censure the attitude of the rich who wished to retain control of their own wealth, neither could one sufficiently display one's anger and disgust at the behaviour of the poor who showed themselves so regardless of the socialistic

movement as to take benefits from the capitalist classes. Fond as these young men were of employing the words "give" and "take," the meaning generally conveyed by their joint use was peculiarly repugnant to them. Take, in their view, should always come first in any case, and a thing taken lost half its value in their eyes if it came as a gift. They would have abolished both generosity and gratitude from a world that can ill afford the loss of those virtues.

Bert drank in every tenet of this creed, and revelled in the discussions and execrations as much as he delighted in the wishy-washy sentimentalism. He was an unhealthy, discontented, miserable boy, his hand against every one; and his club was the only place where he felt himself more or less at his ease.

There was, however, one spot which he liked better to be in, and that was the household of the Querterots.

He had gone to school with Julie Querterot, for it so happened that Bert's father was a Lancashire man and a Roman Catholic. It is true that when he died, as he did when Bert was only thirteen, the boy's mother immediately removed him to another school and saw to it that he imbibed her hatred of Rome; but he did not take any more kindly to her own church, and when she herself died five or six years later he was going pretty much his own way, which was a way devoid of religious belief of any kind. In spite of this, he never lost touch with his little schoolfellow; and, as the Querterots dealt at Tremmels' shop and the children were always together, the two families became acquainted, and a certain friendship even sprang up between Madame Querterot and Mrs. Tremmels. These ladies drank tea together, and smiled over the devotion of Bert for little Julie. This was in the days when prosperity reigned in both houses.

It was different after Mrs. Tremmels' death, when

Bert discovered that the business, of which he had never been allowed to learn the details, was on the verge of bankruptcy, Mrs. Tremmels having conducted it since her husband's death with an eye more to her own aggrandisement than to profit. She had opened two large branches and started milk carts drawn by Shetland ponies; and, having no capital, had borrowed money to do it. Custom under her management had fallen off; the branches had had to be closed; the smart ponies sold; and, at the time of her death, she could no longer find the interest on the borrowed money and the mortgagees were at the point of foreclosing.

Bert, who spent half his evenings in advocating the redistribution of wealth, did not at all enter into the spirit of the thing when he found himself quietly set on one side while his own wealth, that is to say, the competency to which he had always believed himself heir, was redistributed without anyone consulting him. He took it very ill indeed, and said things about his dead mother which would have brought him his dismissal from the office if they had come to the ears of either Mr. Ennidge or Mr. Pring. He had been in their employment about a year when she died, and had done fairly well in it, for he was not a bad worker, nor even without intelligence of a kind. Still, he only kept his post by the skin of his teeth, for he had been in the office more than long enough for Mr. Pring to take a violent dislike to him, and if it had not been for the extremely kind heart of Mr. Ennidge, who argued that he could not dismiss the youth to whom Fortune had already dealt so severe a blow, Bert would have been sacked a dozen times a week. He had, however, no idea of this, and considered himself indispensable and miserably underpaid.

He certainly was not paid a great deal, though more than he was worth to Mr. Pring, at all events, and

Madame Querterot ceased abruptly to invite him to her house. He continued, however, to visit it from time to time, and a couple more years went by without further event. Then came the sudden and tragic failure of the Querterots. Eugène Querterot shot himself; and in the fallen state of their fortunes the two impoverished women he left behind him were glad of any friend who stood by them. The sudden dropping off of their old acquaintances created a new bond of sympathy between them and the young man, and when they moved to Pimlico and he was the only person who ever went to see them, he received a much warmer welcome, at all events from the mother, than he had lately grown to expect.

Gradually he went more and more often, until he formed the habit of dropping in at least every other evening. He had always been fond of Julie, and perhaps of no one else in the world, since he had shown little affection for his parents; now, as he saw her with increasing frequency, his feelings for her became more intense, till every day he seemed to see in her new and more entrancing perfections, and even his enthusiasms for Socialism faded under the continual protest of her aversion to it. He admitted to himself with a kind of thrill of self-defiance that Julie was so clever, so sensible, so wonderfully reasonable and clear-sighted, that her opinion on any subject could not be despised, and it became more and more plain to him that if she thought badly of Socialism that doctrine would find difficulty in retaining his complete loyalty. To be short, by the time she reached her eighteenth birthday Bert was head over ears in love with the girl, and had scarcely a thought in which she did not predominate. Madame Querterot watched it all from beneath her heavy eyelids. She said nothing, but the idea that here was one who in time might be useful to her

crept into her brain and took deep root there as the weeks went by.

Julie was pious and devout. It was about this time that she began to speak about entering a religious sisterhood, but the storm of reproach and upbraiding that this desire provoked in her mother caused her to relinquish the idea for the time being, and, more particularly, not to talk of it any more. The only visible effect of the suggestion was that Madame Querterot welcomed Bert more effusively than usual, and now often invited him to stay to supper.

It may be judged how readily he accepted, and these evenings were certainly the happiest hours in his life. He used to come early and help Julie to lay the table, and sometimes even to prepare the meal; and if her sleeve chanced to brush against his shoulder as she stooped over the fire or reached up to a shelf he would be reduced to a state of speechless ecstasy, which Madame Querterot found a pleasant change from the usual aggressive torrent of his talk.

In spite of her quiet and demure ways, Julie had a girlish fondness for dress and finery, and the offerings that from time to time Bert laid at her feet, of gloves and trinkets, were a great source of innocent pleasure to her. There was a time when he sallied forth from his lodgings armed with the savings of months, and the intention of buying a ring, which he should present to her accompanied by a speech he prepared for the occasion, in which the secret of his heart was to be imparted, together with the request that the ring should be a token of their engagement. But his courage failed him at the jeweller's counter; he felt suddenly a conviction, amounting to a certainty, that Julie would refuse; and, rather than risk knowing the worst, he abandoned his project and spent his hoardings on a brooch which he himself did not really admire, and

which Julie, when she received it, thought hideous. The only person who was pleased was the jeweller, who had had the thing in his shop two years and simply loathed the sight of it.

It was soon after this that the great plan, of which Madame Querterot had had the elements incubating in her mind for a long while, was hatched, and presented itself to her in a complete and material form. She knew from the first that she could not carry it out alone; and, casting over in her thoughts for the help she required, saw in Bert a tool made ready to her hand. When she broached her idea to him she had her design prepared, down to every detail.

It was on the night when he had treated the two women to the theatre, as has been related in an early page of this narrative. Madame Querterot began by telling the young man that she would never allow her daughter to marry one so poor as himself, and added quickly that she knew of a way by which he could attain both money and the assistance of her influence exerted on his behalf with Julie. Having excited his curiosity and his hopes she bound him to secrecy and disclosed her purpose to him.

"It is yourself who gave me the good idea," she assured him. "It is your socialistic teaching, is it not, to take from the rich? they have more than is reasonable, those others!"

They were walking up and down before the little house in Pimlico where the Querterots lived in these days of poverty; Julie had left them and gone to bed; the glimmer of a candle came from behind a blind in the room upstairs.

"Of course they have," Bert grunted. "But it's no use your thinking you can take their money from them without further legislation. What price the police?"

"Ah, the police," sighed Madame Querterot, "if only they would not meddle in what is not their affair! But, look you, there are cases which are exceptional. There are cases which ought to receive immediate attention, which cry out for treatment of the most drastic. If the law is slow—and I grant you that the law has great need of alteration—when a matter is exceptionally urgent, I say, the good citizen must take it in his own hands to see justice done. And if while we render a service to humanity we do so with profit to ourselves, it is clear that the ends of justice are doubly served."

Bert could not help agreeing with these excellent precepts. Indeed, Madame Querterot's air of supernatural wisdom would have impressed the most sceptical.

"It is not enough to talk, one must demonstrate one's faith in a theory. By the means I shall propose you can prove how well Socialism will work in practice; for here will the poor, as represented by us, be made richer, and yet the rich person who will have changed our fortunes need scarcely feel any deprivation. You remember my talking to you at supper-time about a lady, a very wealthy lady, one of my clientele?"

"Yes," said Bert. "A Jewess, wasn't it?"

"It is true. A Jewess! And have not the Jews for centuries ground the bones of the poor? Who more fitted to be the first to contribute some of their ill-gotten gains in return? Should they not be obliged to restore some of that money which they never earned?"

"I daresay," assented Bert; "but I wish you'd hurry up and let's see what you're getting at, that's all."

"Eh bien! This woman, this Jewess, is enormously rich, as I tell you. And what does she do with her money? My friend, she covers herself with diamonds!

It is those diamonds which I propose to myself to deprive her of."

"What, steal them?" Bert's tone was troubled, although in his heart he had known from the first whither her talk drifted.

"Steal! What a word." Impossible to convey the contempt of Madame Querterot's tone. "Is it right then, that she should be permitted to have so much when others starve? Is it right that she should flaunt her jewels in the face of the hungry poor?"

Madame Querterot, who had a good memory, went on to quote phrase after phrase she had at various times heard fall from Bert's own lips. She poured his favourite catchwords into his ears, and strengthened them with arguments of her own. She painted the robbery she designed in such glowing colours that you would have thought, to hear her, that it was a sacrifice she was going to make for the good of humanity. She passed imperceptibly to picturing the delight of Julie when she should be presented with one of the less easily identified jewels, to the readiness with which, at the advice and with the glad consent of her mother, she would accept the heart and hand of the prosperous and enriched Albert, to the happiness of the young couple ensconced in their charming house, surrounded by motors, gramophones, champagne; in fine, all the luxuries due to a girl of Julie's perfections. Madame Querterot did not stop till she came to her own prospective joys, her grandchildren climbing on her knee. It was enough for the blushing and intoxicated Bert. He surrendered, agreed to all she proposed, put himself entirely under her directions, and these his prospective mother-in-law willingly proceeded to give him.

She explained to him first at some length the character of Mrs. Vanderstein, and the means by which she hoped to play upon her weakness.

"There is," said she, "a young Prince—the Prince Felipe of Targona—now in London and staying at Fianti's Hotel in Grosvenor Street, which is situated just opposite to the house of this Jewess. It so happened to-day, as I was in the midst of my massaging, that she jumped up and ran to the window to see this young man pass, and I also looked out. Now by some chance the Prince, as he drove by, happened to lift his head and look straight into Mrs. Vanderstein's face. It was a most lucky occurrence, and I could not have hoped for anything so providential to arrive. One would say, indeed, that it is an omen for me, a mandate to carry out my plan. Mrs. Vanderstein was delighted at this encounter of the eyes, and did not disguise her pleasure. Well, see how simple is now my part. I have in the shop some tortoise-shell combs, purchased at a ridiculous price by that poor Eugène when we first started in business here in London. They are very beautiful, of the finest workmanship, exquisitely and intricately carved, but of a pattern antiquated and *démodé*. We have never been able to sell them.

"Now see, I shall take those combs, and present myself at Fianti's with a petition that I may see the Princess of Targona, mother of Prince Felipe. For her I have a story that my husband was of Targona, and that the combs also come from that country. I shall offer them to Her Highness as a present from a humble and expatriated subject, and say that my late husband refused to part with them out of patriotism, and, when everything else he possessed had to be sold, clung always to the only objects he had left to remind him of his beloved Targona. It is quite probable that the Princess will be affected by this touching history. She may even make me a present; but that is by the way. What is really of importance is that I should be left alone in one of the apartments occupied by the

Royal party for a few minutes. If I can manage that—and I think you may have confidence that I will do so—I shall obtain some pieces of the Prince's note-paper on which his royal device or monogram is certainly engraved; at all events it will bear some distinguishing mark, and it will go hard if a few sheets of it do not find their way into my bag.

"The next step will be easy. I shall issue from the hotel at a moment when I have ascertained, by peeping from a window, that Mrs. Vanderstein is on her balcony, where at a certain hour she very often goes to water some flowers she has there. She will see me pass; and, as she is very curious about all that goes on at Fianti's, she will remark on the incident. I shall tell her that I have been called by the Prince of Targona, who has fallen madly in love with her at first sight. You may think she will not believe this, but trust me to make it plausible; and she will be readier to credit such an idea than you imagine, for in the first place all beautiful women are ready to believe that their attractions are irresistible—and she is beautiful, this Jewess, not unlike what I was myself when I was younger—and in the second place, Mrs. Vanderstein is of a nature romantic to the point of ridicule, and is always, I am convinced, fabricating for herself stories of heroes and princes, with herself for the heroine of these fables.

"How do I know, you ask me? I tell you I know. I am a judge of character; I have an aptitude for that. Eh bien! I shall convince the Jewess that she is adored by a reigning Prince, with frenzy, with devotion, with passion; that he thinks of nothing but her; that he would put his hand in the fire for her sake, that he is ready to abdicate his throne, to give up the government of his country. In short, that he wishes to marry her, and that if she will not listen to his

addresses he has nothing further to live for in this world. What is perhaps the weak point in my tale is the idea that Prince Felipe should have chosen to make a confidante of myself, but, believe me, my dear Bert, I shall make even that appear not unnatural, and, as a matter of fact, stranger things are done every day. All this will take time, I do not know how long—days, perhaps weeks. I must find out how long the Prince stays in London," added Madame Querterot, more to herself than to her companion.

It was the one thing she had forgotten.

"I shall write her letters on the Royal notepaper; and as she will send the answers by my hand, I shall know their contents and be able to reply to them without arousing any suspicions on her part. In his impassioned epistles the Prince will beg for an interview; he will lament the obstacles that prevent his seeing her either at the hotel or in her own residence, and he will finally, I am sure, persuade her to meet him for the purpose of making his acquaintance, in a house which he will indicate.

"She will consent to all he proposes, or I am much mistaken. It is at this point, my dear Bert, that your assistance becomes so indispensable. You are a house agent's clerk. I shall require a house; and it is you who must take it for me, in an assumed name, of course, and without the knowledge of your employers."

"I don't see how that can ever be done," Bert objected.

They were still pacing slowly up and down the dingy street. A policeman at the corner of the road looked at them once or twice, decided they were harmless, and ceased his attentions. The light in Julie's bedroom was long since extinguished.

Madame Querterot cleared her throat and began again.

"There will be a gentleman from India, let us say," she resumed, "who will call at the office at an hour when the two partners are out. No one will regret this more than yourself, but in their absence you will do your best to attend to the requirements of the gentleman from India. He will want a house, and he will want it immediately. He will desire to take it by the week and he will be ready to pay a large rent. He is somewhat eccentric, this gentleman, and dislikes meeting strangers. He will tell you to see about getting a charwoman to make the house ready for him, and he will settle then and there on the terms, on the day he is to take possession, and upon every necessary detail. Then, having signed the agreement, he will pay you the first week's rent in advance—for which I will provide the money—and he will walk out of the office. You will tell Mr. Ennidge and Mr. Pring, when they return, about the eccentric gentleman from India, and they will not be suspicious about him since there will be the money for the rent."

"Are you going to act being this gentleman you're talking about?" asked Bert.

"No," replied Madame Querterot. "He will not exist at all; it is not necessary that he should ever appear. But it may be very useful that he should be thought to exist."

"Then who is to sign the lease?"

"You will do that," said the Frenchwoman, "you must begin at once to practise writing with your left hand. Choose a short name—we will call him Mr. West—and write it over and over again many times on a sheet of foolscap, which you will always burn when you have covered it. Never forget to burn it, Bert. You will find it quite easy in a few days, and it will not in the least resemble your own hand."

"I don't half like it," Bert commented.

"I promise you it will be all that is most simple. The Indian gentleman will ask you personally to meet him at the house on the day he takes possession, and he will tell you to be sure to come yourself, as he dislikes strangers and prefers not to do business with more than one person. So you will get the house ready for him and hand him the key and leave him in it. That is all the trouble there will be about the house. Not much to take, for the sake of gaining a fortune and a charming wife, you must admit? The Vanderstein will come to the house to meet Prince Felipe. She will find us there, masked and unknown to her. We shall relieve her of her jewels, which I shall have arranged that she will wear; Prince Felipe is so fond of jewellery, it is a perfect passion with him to see women so adorned! So I shall tell her, and she will not fail to bedeck herself with them. When all is done she may return home; disappointed, I fear; but life is full of disillusions, and the blame will rest on the eccentric Mr. West from India."

It was all very plausible. Bert could pick no holes in the plan. He tried to offer one or two objections, but was quickly overruled, and finally said good night and went home to bed committed to aid and abet Madame Querterot in her purpose to the best of his power.

All went well. Madame Querterot succeeded even beyond her expectations. The Vanderstein, as she called her, was all a flutter of excitement and delight, and Madame Querterot related to Bert at great length and with huge enjoyment the scene in which she had embarked upon the hoax, and the easy gullibility of "la Juive."

"'Figure to yourself,' I said to her, 'that this morning I receive a summons to Fianti's from a lady in waiting on the Princess of Targona! What an

honour! You can imagine my excitement! This lady used formerly to stay much at her country's legation here, in London, and she was in the habit of making herself *coiffée* by that poor Eugène. So it appears that yesterday she sent for him; but, when they told her that the poor dear was no longer on this earth, she had the amiability to seek me out, having heard of all our cruel misfortune, and asked that I should present myself in his place. To-day, therefore, I attended at the hotel, and had the pleasure of making the *coiffure* of a charming lady. Mais elle est charmante, cette dame-là! But—and here follows the affair that is of interest to you, madame—as I left the apartment of the lady in waiting and was about to descend the staircase, a voice called me back, and, looking round, what was my surprise to perceive no less a person than His Highness, Prince Felipe, who appeared to be beckoning to me to join him in a dark part of the passage.'

"Mrs. Vanderstein interrupted me with sparkling eyes. 'Do tell me,' she cried, 'the words that His Highness spoke to you! Sit down, Madame Justine, and tell me every single thing you can remember about it.' I drew a chair close to the sofa where Mrs. Vanderstein was seated, and I continued my narrative in a confidential undertone. 'I could not imagine what it was that Prince Felipe had to say to me, but I thought for a moment that possibly his mother required my services, and I was enchanted at the idea that perhaps I was this day to dress the hair of a Royal personage. But as soon as I drew near, the Prince began to ask me questions of which at first I could not understand the purport. Soon, however, I comprehended. "You live in this street?" he asked. "No, monsieur," I replied; "I live far from here." "But I saw you," he cried, "I am convinced that it was you I saw!"

" When did Your Highness see me ? " I inquired. I was indeed flattered that he should condescend to recognise me. " I saw you yesterday. You were looking out of the window of a house opposite this hotel," said he positively. " Ah yes, monsieur, it is true. I was in the house of Mrs. Vanderstein, one of my clients, and we had the good fortune to see you drive past."

" ' I began now to see why I was receiving the honour of this interview. " Mrs. Vanderstein ! " he exclaimed. " Is that then her name ? But," he added, " there were two ladies. Which was Mrs. Vanderstein ? " " The elder of the two, monsieur, the one whose hair is dark." " It is she," he said. " Ah, how beautiful she is ! In all my life I have never seen a face that so haunts my memory. It is the face I have dreamed of all these years. But stay," cried he in a different tone and with a look of despair. " You call her Mrs. Vanderstein ! Am I to understand then that she is married ? No matter, her husband must perish ! One of my gentlemen may engage him in a duel. These things can arrange themselves." Such were his words. Ah, madame ! one sees that His Highness is not used to opposition.'

" The Vanderstein was transformed. Her eyes flashed with unaccustomed fires. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips parted, her breath came a little quickly. I was astonished at the change. ' She looks ten years younger,' I said to myself. ' Is it the massage that has had an effect after all ? ' Aloud I continued my tale. ' I explained to the Prince that Mr. Vanderstein had saved him the trouble of arranging a duel. " Then," cried he, " there is no obstacle ! Except," he added in a different and depressed tone, " the wishes of my mother, and of the government of Targona. They are very decided that I must marry for reasons of state, but I have told them again and again that I

will not do it. I will abdicate if they like, but I will never marry except in accordance with the dictates of my heart. And my heart has never before been touched; so that I am sure now that there is but one woman in the world for me. But how am I to meet her? If anyone suspects my feelings, unimaginable difficulties will be thrown in the way. And how can I ever win the affections of the beautiful and adorable Mrs. Vanderstein, if I cannot even imagine a means by which I may make her acquaintance? One thing, however, is sure. Without her I cannot live."

"'Ah, madame,' I said, 'if you could have seen the poor gentleman your heart would have ached for him. On his face so sad an expression! He had an air so miserable and disconsolate. One can see that he has a tender nature! In his despair he strode up and down the corridor, gesticulating with his hands, and rumpling his hair—which is fine like silk—by tearing at it with his fingers! Again and again he would clap his hand to his forehead, or smite himself upon the breast, and, if he abstained from bursting into actual tears, you may be sure it was because the rigorous code, which forbids any public display of feeling in persons of Royal blood, would not allow him to show his emotion even in the presence of so insignificant a person as myself. Ah, the poor young man. I, madame, I, whom he noticed as he would observe your looking-glass or your boot-lace, felt myself ready to take him in my arms and to embrace and comfort him like a mother.'

"I paused for breath, and Mrs. Vanderstein cried: 'Oh, Madame Justine, is it really possible that he should feel like that after only seeing me once, and that at a distance?' 'Love at first sight,' I replied, 'is not a thing of which one has never heard; and assuredly he is in love, this poor Prince Felipe, or I do not know what love is. Several times again he

stopped in front of me, and cried out: "How, how am I to arouse her interest, gain her respect, above all how can I win her heart, when I have no chance of making myself known to her? I cannot hope that she will be attracted by my personal appearance. With one of her mental and spiritual superiority—as I can see at a glance—my rank and position will scarcely avail; it is, then, only by learning the depth and sincerity of my passion, only by realising the fond and tender quality of my love for her, that she may in time be prevailed on to look not altogether unfavourably upon my suit." And much more he said of the same kind. As for me, madame, I assured him I would, in a tactful way, convey to you some hints as to the state of his feelings. He insisted that they should be no more than hints, fearing that you would be offended at his making of me a messenger; so if I have, in my sympathy, overstepped the bounds of discretion, you must judge the fault entirely my own and not attribute it to any lack of manners on the part of the Prince. His intentions are of the most perfect correctness.

"'He questioned me closely as to your way of life, your opinions and habits. "Ah," he cried, "I see we are made for one another, she and I. You say that she likes to surround herself with pictures, flowers, jewels, and the luxurious things of life. She is fond of music and of the arts. Now remark this! I am a collector of paintings and *objets d'art*. I, too, adore music and roses. I, also, have a passion for precious stones and personal adornment. Wherein do we differ? *Hein!* It is plain that we have the same tastes, that I shall be *sympathique* to her. Oh, we must meet! Somehow, somewhere I will arrange, if she consents, that we should meet. Not here. Impossible! Not at her house. I should feel my mother's eye on me.

I could not escape observation if I merely crossed the road. No, neither here nor there, but in some other place of which I will consider. In the meanwhile do you, with the utmost delicacy, sound her feelings as regards myself, and prepare her for a further expression of my own." I think, madame, that that is all that passed between us, but I am to return to Fianti's to-morrow and report to him whether you appeared displeased.' It seemed that Mrs. Vanderstein was not displeased. She spoke very little more, but I could see, by the happy, excited air she wore under her assumed calm, that my words were having all the effect I could wish."

All this Madame Querterot retailed with many details to the interested and amazed Bert, and each succeeding day she had new accounts of her cleverness and success to relate. She wrote impassioned, but eminently "correct" letters on the royal notepaper she had filched in accordance with her plan, and carried them to Mrs. Vanderstein with a hidden, jeering smile at that lady's glad and confiding acceptance of their authenticity.

The night of the gala performance at the opera was fixed on for the deed, and at their every meeting Madame Querterot repeated to Bert her instructions as to the part played by the gentleman from India. She elaborated and filled in her first sketch of his character and behaviour, till at last the young man almost believed in the real existence of Mr. West, and certainly knew far more about him than about most of the people with whom he was actually in daily contact, for, as a rule, he was unobservant to the last degree. She saw also to his learning to write with his left hand, and he was able in a couple of days to do this to her satisfaction. By now Bert was as keen about the project as she could have wished. An

evening spent at his club had strengthened and confirmed his conviction that no one woman had a right to the exclusive enjoyment of so much wealth; and he was now well assured that he would deserve nothing but commendation for trying to readjust the scales. There were moments when, for the fraction of an otherwise optimistical second, he beheld a vision of Julie as she would look at him if she ever heard of what was contemplated; and it was a vision that caused in him a catching of the breath. But the idea for the most part only hovered in the background of his thoughts, so that, while he was always conscious of its neighbourhood, so to speak, he was able with an effort to turn away his mental eyes, and to avoid looking it in the face; and it was then that he would seem to Madame Querterot most eager, most impatient for the night to arrive.

The house in Scholefield Avenue was taken, and Messrs. Ennidge and Pring showed themselves only mildly interested in the mythical Mr. West, and that chiefly on account of his readiness to pay a high rent. Then a difficulty arose; and it was Bert, to his satisfaction and pride, who suggested a way out of it.

Madame Querterot met him one evening with an expression of dismay she made no attempt to conceal.

"There is after all something I have forgotten," she cried. "*Nom d'un nom!* that I can have been so stupid, so idiot! Listen, it is this. The Jewess must drive from the opera to Scholefield Avenue. But in what? It is impossible that she should go in her own automobile, and if she takes a taxi we are equally betrayed. *Aïe, aïe!* what to do?"

CHAPTER XXV

IT was then that Bert had his brilliant idea.

To explain it, reference must be made again to his family history. His father's sister had married a grocer at Richmond, named Stodder, she having been cook in a family at Hampton Court previous to this event.

The pair had five children, and Bert, when a child, was often taken down to visit his relations ; in the hot weather holidays the Stodders had him to stay with them for most of the summer. The children hated him, for he was a spoilt, ill-tempered little boy from the start, but they had to put up with him, and he grew up on familiar if rather quarrelsome terms with the whole family.

The eldest boy, Ned, after he left school, was employed in driving his father's cart about the neighbourhood every day, in order to deliver orders received and to collect fresh ones. It was Bert's favourite occupation to sit in the back of the van, his legs dangling, or kicking against the backboard, while he watched the white roads slip under him and the grocer's dog trotting with extended tongue beneath his drumming heels. Ned was quite aware of the pleasure his cousin took in this not very arduous form of exercise, and he soon devised a way of turning it to his own profit. He pointed out to Bert that he could not expect anyone to put up with his company unless he did something to make it worth their while, and that he for one would

not suffer Bert's company in the van unless he justified his presence by cleaning it when they came home, and by helping to look after the harness and the horse. Bert disliked work, but he hated to be cut off from his drives, and, as Ned was quite firm besides being older and stronger than he was, he told himself that needs must—and Ned that he was the devil—and took up the duties of stable boy.

Under his critical and unsparing master and to the accompaniment of more than a few cuffs and kicks when he tried to shirk his work, Bert became more proficient in the care of the grocer's steed than any less well-adjusted mixture of pain and pleasure would have been likely to result in.

As a further reward, too, the stern Ned so far relented as to allow him occasionally to take the reins. The combination of discipline and fresh air did the Tremmels' boy a world of good, and that was a happy summer for him. Unfortunately, when he returned to Hanover Street his mother soon undid the good effects of Ned's cuffings; and the following summer when he found himself again under his uncle's hospitable roof Ned had left it to enter private service in the stables, and his next cousin had come out of school and succeeded to the job of driving the van. Geoffrey was of a less good-humoured, easy-going disposition than his brother Ned, and Bert was at this age becoming more and more objectionable; it was seldom that Geoffrey could be induced to let him go with him on his rounds, but he followed his brother's example in forcing his cousin to assist him with the horse and cart when he returned with them. This only enraged and embittered Bert, and of the good done the year before the last remnant was now utterly destroyed.

In the meantime, as the years went on, Ned grew up a credit to his family, and a good and favoured servant.

So rapid was his progress, and so astounding—as the Tremmels said—his luck, that by the time he was three-and-twenty he had risen to the situation of coachman to an old lady named Mrs. Wilkinson, the aunt of his former master. This lady kept only one horse and a brougham, and with them drove out every afternoon, in winter from three to five, in summer from four to six. It was impossible to imagine an easier or more comfortable place, and Bert often envied his cousin the soft thing he had stepped into.

Ned was the only one of his relations whom he ever went near nowadays, but he used often to go round to his stable during the luncheon hour and explain to the young coachman how little he deserved his good fortune.

It was not till, for the first time, he beheld Madame Querterot at a loss, not till he heard what in their great plan she had forgotten to provide for, that he suddenly realised that Ned's good fortune was possibly his own as well.

"See here," he said to the agitated Frenchwoman, "I can manage that part." And he told her of his cousin the coachman.

"Mrs. Wilkinson, the lady he works for, has by the rarest luck a house in the same street as the one I have taken. She lives at No. 1 Scholefield Avenue, only a few doors away from No. 13. More than that, it happens that she has a large garden at the back of the house, and the stable is situated at the end of it, quite away from any other buildings. There's luck for you!"

"How is that?" cried Madame Querterot, "explain yourself quick." She was very nervous and excited, and for the only time during the whole business her calm confidence deserted her. It was so near the hour! She had already smoothed away so many difficulties, done the impossible; and if all her hopes were to be

shattered now, and by so small an obstacle, it would be, she told herself, the *comble*.

"Why, this way," Bert reassured her. "Ned is always wanting to go home to Richmond, because the young lady he's keeping company with lives down there, though he makes out to me that it's his family he wants to see. As if anyone wanted to see their family! But his old lady drives out till six every day, and by the time Ned has cleaned up and rubbed down the horse, and fed him, and washed the brougham and the rest of it, it's too late to get a decent train down to Richmond, for it's a tidy way from Scholefield Avenue to Gloucester Road, where the trains connect.

"Now suppose I go to Ned, and tell him I know he wants an evening off, and that if he likes I don't mind doing his job for once, so as he can have it. I'll offer to be about on Monday, when he comes in from taking old Mrs. Wilkinson out for her drive, and to look after the horse and to put it to bye-bye. I've often done it for him when I was a lad, so he knows I can manage, though I don't say he won't be a bit surprised at my offering, so to speak. I think perhaps I'd best say I'll do it for a consideration; he'll be good for a bob where his young lady's concerned, I'll bet. What's more, I'll say I'll feed the horse in the morning, so he won't have to catch the last train back, but can stay down home for the night. After I've seen him off the premises I'll get inside his livery—he's a bigger man than me, though not so long in the leg—and I'll put the horse in again and drive down to Covent Garden and fetch the lady up. We can say the Prince is sending his own carriage for her."

Madame Querterot nearly wept on Bert's neck in her joy and emotion.

"You will save us, my dear friend!" she exclaimed,

pressing his hand, a demonstration that he resented by snatching it savagely away. "What a mind, what a genius, to think of so splendid, so heaven-given a device! Let it be as you say. I am well assured now that all will go well."

These last days were a busy time for Madame Querterot, for there were certain personal details, essential to the success of her plan, to be attended to: there were bills to collect, sales to arrange, and purchases to be made. At last all was done, everything ready, and she stood in the hall of No. 13 Scholefield Avenue awaiting, with only the least flicker of the nerves, the sound of wheels before the door.

CHAPTER XXVI

EARLY as it was in the adventure, Bert was already realising the difficulties of the part he had to play. He had induced the gratified—though suspicious and thankless—Ned to accept his services in the matter of the horse; and, having seen him depart with a small brown paper parcel—which furnished the outward evidence of his intention to stay the night with his people—had harnessed the animal again in good time, arrayed himself in the livery belonging to Ned, and adorned his chin with the false beard provided by Madame Querterot, so that no time should be wasted on his return. "I do look a guy," he said to himself, as he contemplated his reflection in the strip of looking-glass in the harness-room.

Nothing remained but to drive down to Covent Garden, and take his place on the rank of waiting vehicles. This, he was surprised to find, was not so easy as he had expected. He discovered that attempting to control Mrs. Wilkinson's dun horse, which had a willing spirit and a hard mouth, was a very different affair from driving the old and sluggish beast that used to meander between the shafts of his uncle's van. Their progress was erratic in the extreme, and he several times narrowly avoided an accident. The Providence which looks after bad drivers did not fail him, however, and at length he found himself, a good deal to his surprise—for at one period of the journey hope had altogether deserted him—forming one of

the long string of motors and carriages that had already drawn into line in the vicinity of the opera house.

Now began a time during which the fear that the expected summons would never reach him alternated with something very like hope that it would not. As he sat on the box, while minute after minute passed, and still no voice cried for Mr. Targon's carriage, he was beset with ever growing misgivings as to the appearance he presented, and felt that his ill-fitting livery and the false beard, which the scarf he had wrapped round his neck and chin only partially concealed, must be riveting upon him the eyes of every beholder ; so that not a look was cast in his direction but he read in it distrust and suspicion.

Even the most seemingly interminable suspense comes to an end at last, and he had not endured these torments more than a short half-hour before the words for which he had been waiting fell upon his ear, and making his way out of the line he succeeded in guiding the dun horse beneath the portico of the theatre.

The safe accomplishment of this manœuvre, however, fully occupied his every faculty, and it was only when the carriage had come to a standstill before the doors that he had time to glance in the direction of the lady he was to carry off. With a shock of surprise and dismay he saw that not one but two elegantly attired women were about to enter the carriage.

He had not the courage for more than a feeble remonstrance ; indeed, it needed all the courage he could muster to lift up his voice at all in the presence of the waiting attendants, and in the brilliant glare of the lamps. After he had driven some way in increasing perplexity and irresolution, he stopped, and tried again to induce Barbara to get out ; but the

attention the ensuing discussion aroused from the passers-by and the sight of an approaching policeman were too much for his nerves, and he decided hastily to drive on and allow Madame Querterot to deal with this unexpected complication. A glimpse of her face when they arrived in Scholefield Avenue, and she saw what had happened, did not add to his peace of mind. He drove round to Mrs. Wilkinson's stables, extinguished the carriage lamps, and unharnessed the dun horse by the light of his pocket electric torch as quietly and quickly as he might, his heart sinking at the prospect of what she would say to him when he returned. It was lucky that the stable gate opened on to such a lonely street as the one which ran at the back of the gardens of the houses in Scholefield Avenue.

A blank wall faced it across the road, studded at intervals with the doors to the gardens at the back of the houses in Westford Avenue, which lay beyond. There was another stable some hundred yards further down; but, unless some one were awake and about in that direction, Bert knew that there was little chance of his presence and movements being discovered. Still he could not feel secure for a moment, and it was not till he had put everything in some kind of order and shut the door of the loose box behind him that he breathed again. He hurried round to No. 13, seeing the fancied forms of lurking policemen behind every tree and in every shadow, and it was with a hand already shaking with agitation that he gave the three taps on the door, with which it had been agreed that he should signal his return to Madame Querterot.

She greeted him, as he had feared she would, with a storm of whispered reproaches. What had he been thinking of to bring that girl to the house? Was he mad? As she looked at him, however, in the light of the gas jet which burned at the foot of the stairs,

she saw plainly enough that he was in a state of nervousness which she had not expected; and that, if he was to be of any use to her in the crisis that was upon them, she had better employ herself in soothing rather than adding to his distress of mind.

"Well, well," she interrupted her own words, "it is perhaps of no such great consequence. A little more trouble, possibly, for you; but of that we will talk later. For the moment we must get to business. These summer nights are short and we have much to do before morning. Go into the dining-room, while I prevail upon Miss Turner to leave her friend. I will put her in the library, where she will be out of the way for the present."

After a few minutes, during which Bert waited, breathless, in the darkness of the dining-room, she was back again, and announced in a whisper that all was well. Barbara had been shown into the back room; and upstairs Mrs. Vanderstein, alone and expectant, awaited the coming of the Prince.

"She has got on all her jewels," sniggered the Frenchwoman, drawing on her gloves. "And she little thinks that there are here two people who appreciate them as her Prince never could. Ah! Bah! Are there imbeciles in the world? Now then, my friend, you know what you have to do. We rush into the room, you seize this fair creature and hold her fast, while I administer a little whiff of chloroform that shall keep her quiet and prevent any outcry, so that we can remove from her the gems at our ease. See, I have the bottle ready. Allons donc; à la besogne!"

They went softly and quickly up the stairs. Now that the moment for action had arrived, Bert's confidence was in some measure restored. The sight of the diamonds glittering in the light of the brougham

lamp, when Mrs. Vanderstein had stood upbraiding him for his bad driving, had sharpened his appetite for them, and the prospect of fingering the shining things was a pleasant one. Inside the four walls of the house, with the door bolted between them and the interfering outside world, it seemed again safe and desirable enough to take her jewels from this pampered member of the idle rich, and afterwards to lead her blindfolded to some sequestered place, as they had planned, and there release her to find her own way home. Even if she knew where the house was to which she had been decoyed, it would be empty and discreetly silent by the time she could bring to it the avenging hosts of the police. He himself was so well disguised that she never could recognise him again; besides, she would only see him for one moment. True, Madame Querterot was well known to her, but Madame Querterot had her own plans for avoiding any unpleasant consequences of their deed; so she had informed him, and knowing her as he did, he never doubted her intention and capacity of taking care of herself. A medley of these thoughts was in his mind as they mounted the stairs, and paused for an instant at the drawing-room door. No sound came from behind it, and with an encouraging whisper to her companion Madame Querterot turned the handle and went in.

From the end of the room Mrs. Vanderstein rose to greet them, with a radiant, blushing countenance. Always a beautiful woman, she had never been more lovely than at this moment. The smile faded from her lips as she realised that here was not the lover she looked to see; but before she had time to speak Bert was beside her, clutching her round the waist and dragging her back towards the sofa, while over the mouth she opened with a remonstrating cry were clapped the plump hands of Madame Querterot,

holding between them something that choked her with its sickly, overwhelming odour.

"See," said Madame Querterot, after a short interval, "see, she sleeps!" But still she continued to hold the mouth of the bottle over Mrs. Vanderstein's mouth and nose.

It was at this moment that the door was flung open, and Barbara rushed into the room.

Bert sprang to meet her, fully alive to the undesirability of her presence. It hardly needed Madame Querterot's cry of "Take her away," to make him grasp her by the arms, and half push, half carry her out on to the landing and down the narrow stairs to the library, where he left her after a minute or two safely locked in. He listened for a little while outside the door, for he fancied the girl might raise the alarm or do some unimagined, desperate thing which should imperil their safety. She had already threatened to set fire to the house, and he racked his brains to guess what might be her next move. He was in no hurry to return to the drawing-room, moreover, for his heart was beating unpleasantly fast, and the sight of the helpless lady they had so violently treated, sinking quiet and motionless on to the sofa, had filled him with vague discomfort.

After all—the thought would not be kept away any longer—what would Julie think of all this? Could she ever be brought to care for a robber? Yes, that was what he was—a robber. His fortifying socialistic claptrap refused, somehow, to come to his aid in this hour of need. What would Julie say? Already misgivings undermined his unstable resolves. He sat down half-way up the stairs and buried his face in his hands.

It was ten minutes before he could make up his mind to go back to the drawing-room.

Madame Querterot looked up quickly as he entered; she was on her knees beside the unconscious form of Mrs. Vanderstein, engaged in unfastening the clasp of a bracelet. A bright silk-covered cushion lay on the floor beside her.

"Where have you been?" she said. "Come and help me to get these things off."

Bert went over and stood opposite her. As his eyes rested on the figure that lay so still upon the sofa, a horrible doubt leapt into his mind. How white, how dreadful Mrs. Vanderstein looked! How quiet, how motionless she was. Could she indeed be sleeping? There was no movement to show that she breathed.

Bert looked at Madame Querterot.

"Madame Querterot!" was all he could find to say. But there was a world of accusation in his hoarse tones, and the Frenchwoman, looking up in reply to his words, was unable to stand the fixed stare with which he glared into her face, as if expecting to read the terrible truth upon it. Poor innocent, to look for the truth upon that face!

Still, for once, she could not meet his eyes, and her glance shifted furtively to one side.

He knew now; and in the horror and rage which fell upon him he would have struck her, if the sofa on which Mrs. Vanderstein was stretched had not been between them.

With dropping jaw and eyes starting from his head he thrust his face forward towards her.

"You have killed her!" he whispered.

Madame Querterot laughed a little nervously "It was an accident. I gave her a little more chloroform than I had the intention."

"That is a lie. You meant to kill her all along. That cushion! You have suffocated her! I see it now. Oh! I see it in your face; murderess!"

"Bert, don't be a fool!"

"Well, we'll see who's a fool," said he. "I am going for the police!"

"My good Bert, you are, as I say, a fool," said Madame Querterot, resuming with an effort her usual assurance. "For what will you fetch the police? What will you tell them, eh? That you brought this woman here in some one else's carriage, which you stole for the purpose; and that I killed her, I suppose? A likely story! When you are gone I shall scream and run to Miss Turner, who knows me well; and her I shall tell that you have done this thing, and that now you would murder me, and her also. Do you think the police would believe that I have done it? Why, I am not stronger than Mrs. Vanderstein; it is impossible that I could have done it alone, and they will see that easily. But it is very possible that you could have done it, and believe me, Bert, if you are not sensible and do all that I tell you, it is you, and you alone, who will dangle in the air as a sequel to this accident."

At this forecast, which he saw too plainly had a smack of probability about it, Bert's resolution, never a dependable feature in his composition, wavered and failed him. He flung himself down in a corner of the room, bewailing his fate and cursing his companion with impartial heartiness.

Madame Querterot waited till he had exhausted his powers of recrimination, and busied herself in transferring the jewels from the body of Mrs. Vanderstein to the bag she had provided for the purpose.

Then she had her turn.

"What," she cried, "did you actually suppose I was sufficiently imbecile to contemplate allowing this woman to live, when her first act would have been to have me arrested? How do you suppose either of us could have escaped, when it was I who made all the

arrangements with her that she should come to this house, and when she knew as well as you do that it was I that chloroformed her? I could not have done it without your help, so that you are as responsible as I; and more, for it was you who brought her to the house. You brought the other girl too, you great, stupid, whimpering baby, and she will have to die as well before either you or I are safe. And that will be entirely your doing, for if she had not come she could have lived till Doomsday for all I cared. Now, what you have to do is to get the spade which I brought this afternoon from the tool house in the garden, and dig a grave under the trees at the back of the house, where you can hide this." She patted the arm of Mrs. Vanderstein with gruesome familiarity.

But Bert, sick and faint with horror, absolutely refused to do as he was told in this matter. To go down into the starlit garden, to dig for interminable hours in the open, with every shadow full of unknown terrors, which would leap on him from out of the darkness, pounce on him from behind, come creeping and gibbering at him with every leaf that stirred or every chance footfall in a distant street! No. Again, it was a long job to dig a grave; he knew that. The ground would be hard; he would want a pickaxe. In any case he would not do it.

Nothing Madame Querterot could say shook him in this determination. She was growing really anxious, for it wanted only two or three hours to dawn, and it began to look as if the body must be left where it lay, when, by a lucky inspiration, she thought of the flower stand on the balcony. Would Bert help her there? It would be quicker done and less dangerous if he would, but if needs must, she said, she could manage that alone.

With a furious, shuddering sulkiness, Bert consented to help.

He opened a window and undid the fastening of the shutters. Then, after putting out the gas, they stepped cautiously out on to the balcony, Madame Querterot carrying the spade, and, stooping behind the balustrade, peered anxiously up and down the deserted street. There was no one to be seen or heard, and with frenzied haste they began to pull up the plants which adorned the flower box. At Madame Querterot's direction Bert ladled out shovelfuls of loose soil, till the box was more than half empty and the balcony was heaped high with black mould.

They stole back to the drawing-room and Madame Querterot took from a parcel that she had stored away in a corner of the room a bundle of clothing, which she told Bert to carry downstairs and give to Miss Turner to put on.

"It would never do," she said, "for either of them to be found with clothes on them that could be identified as their own. It would be best that never should they be found at all, but it is well to be prepared for everything, and though I fear Mrs. Vanderstein is sure to come to light sooner or later, I prefer to take even more precautions with regard to Miss Turner, as I shall be obliged to leave the disposal of her to your scanty wits. Tell the girl, therefore, some cock and bull story about intending to help her to escape, so that she may readily attire herself in these clothes, which I had intended for the Vanderstein. They are all bought in different rag shops, and there is nothing on any of them to identify them by. Tell her also to undo her hair and to screw it up plainly so as to hide it as much as possible. Now go and do as I say."

"But it is impossible," cried Bert, "that that girl should be killed too. I cannot, I will not let you do it!"

"So far from letting me do it, my dear Bert," replied

Madame Querterot placidly, "it is probable that you will have to do it yourself. But we will speak of that again."

Bert went reluctantly on his mission, and by the time he returned Madame Querterot had undressed and decently enveloped the body in the chintz cover of one of the sofas. Mrs. Vanderstein's clothes lay in a heap on a chair near by, and the Frenchwoman was vainly trying, with a silken petticoat, to rub away some large stains which appeared on the carpet, beside the couch. As Bert came in she got up quickly, abandoning her efforts.

"What is it?" he asked, "what is that on the floor?"

"Nothing. Only something I spilt. Some of the chloroform. It can easily be hidden." And she pushed the sofa over the place.

She said nothing to Bert about the vitriol she had used, nor did he suspect it till the following Thursday night, when he was obliged to undergo the ghastly ordeal of seeing the body unearthed by Mr. Gimblet.

With a preliminary reconnaissance of the balcony to make sure that no policeman was patrolling the street below, the young man and the woman carried out the body of their victim, laid it in the grave they had made ready, and then fell in silence to the task of restoring to the box the mound of earth that was heaped upon the floor. When all was finished and the flowers planted and blooming once more in their former places, there still remained a quantity of soil for which there was no room in the stand.

Madame Querterot fetched a couple of housemaid's pails and they carried the superfluous mould out by the back door to the garden, where they scattered it widely upon the flower beds. It was a slow business and necessitated many journeys, but by

now Bert, in a paroxysm of fear, which was in part for his own neck and almost as much at the certainty that he would irretrievably lose Julie if any trace should ever be discovered of that night's work, showed himself more tractable, and by the time they had made the place shipshape was ready to lend a receptive ear to the proposals of his resourceful leader as to their future conduct. At her suggestion they sat down opposite to one another in the back of the drawing-room, to talk over the best means of averting even a shadow of suspicion.

"We are safe enough," Madame Querterot asserted positively; "how is it you say? safe as a church! Once the girl is disposed of, that is. Ah, my friend, you made a mistake when you permitted the inclusion of Miss Turner in the *partie*, but it is not impossible to remedy that error. Here is the chloroform. What do you say? Shall we repeat the comedy which we have just performed? For me, I am ready, for your sake, to do my share."

"No, no," cried Bert with a shiver, "not that, not that! Besides," he added weakly, "there is only one flower box on the balcony."

"It is true," mused the Frenchwoman, "that there is no room there for another burial. And you still refuse to dig a grave? Perhaps to-morrow night you will have more courage?" she suggested hopefully.

But of this Bert held out no hope. "It would take too long," he said. "I might screw myself up to commence the job, but I simply couldn't stick to it for an hour, no more than I could fly. I'll do what I can, Madame Querterot; I don't want to be hung for your beastly murders, and if I can't keep my neck out of a noose any other way I suppose I've got to do what you say—within reason, that is. It's the girl's life or mine right enough, I believe, and I can't be blamed for

thinking of myself first in such a case," said Bert, nearly crying; "though as a matter of fact it's not so much myself I'm thinking of, in a manner of speaking, as it's Joolie. A nice thing for her it would be, to have it said that her mother was hung! A fair treat, that 'ud be!"

"It's very considerate of you, I'm sure, Bert, to take that view," said Madame Querterot, with bitter sarcasm, "but it's no good talking like that if you refuse to do anything to prevent such a scandal, which I agree with you in thinking is one to be avoided if possible. Here is another idea, though I think I am too patient with you, and shall not waste much more time in trying to assist you out of a danger you have yourself brought upon us. Suppose you take the girl out to a place where there is some deep water—there is a canal near the Zoological Gardens, is there not?—and push her in when she is walking beside it. She will go with you willingly, if you let her think you are helping her to escape, and you can find a pretext for attaching something heavy to her first, so that she will not trouble us by rising again to the surface. It should be easy to do on a dark night, and there is no moon now, as you know."

Bert had plenty of objections to raise to this plan, and they discussed others with no better result. In the end he was obliged to admit that drowning offered the best and easiest solution to the difficulty, and she wrung from him a promise that he would get rid of the unfortunate young lady by this means on the following night.

In vain Madame Querterot urged the danger of delay, and the perils which would attend on their keeping Barbara in the house for the next twenty-four hours. Bert was obstinately determined not to venture forth with her at this hour, for it wanted but a short time to

sunrise and any delay would mean that the culminating act must be performed after the full darkness of the night had been diluted by the coming dawn. Even Madame Querterot was obliged to admit that there was something in his argument, and it was finally decided that he should wait till another day had passed.

In the meantime the Frenchwoman, as had previously been arranged, would lose no time in leaving England, carrying with her the jewels, which, she assured Bert, would be very easy for her to dispose of in her own country without detection, as she had old friends there who were "in that business." She promised faithfully to send him one-half of the proceeds as soon as she received the money.

"And then, mon cher," said she, "you and Julie will set up your little *ménage*. I think you will find my daughter less capricious when I am gone. She will be lonely, the poor little one, without her mother." Madame Querterot's voice quavered with emotion at the thought, and she lifted her handkerchief to her face to wipe away a tear—or was it to conceal a smile?

In spite of all assurances, she was unable to impart to Bert her confidence in their safety from suspicion.

"You'll see, something will give the whole show away," he kept saying, half for the comfort of hearing himself contradicted. "Murder will out; that's well known."

"It is impossible." Madame Querterot spoke with refreshing conviction. "Absolutely impossible if you manage the canal affair with discretion. Consider. You walk innocently along a public path by the waterside, with a companion who, mon Dieu! is so maladroit as to stumble and to fall in. If anyone should be attracted by the splash, or she should scream and

be heard, are you not doing your utmost to rescue her?—though, if possible, at a different place on the bank to the spot at which she displayed such unfortunate clumsiness—but that is a remote chance, for with proper care you will be able to manage so that the contretemps occurs at a point from which no noise will reach the ears of strangers."

"I know where there's a gap in the fence that runs along the park side of the canal," Bert interrupted involuntarily.

"Mourning her loss," Madame Querterot went on, "but silently, you understand, you continue your walk, and the world hears no more of Miss Barbara Turner. Even if her body is eventually found, there will be nothing on it which can be recognised as belonging to any particular person; and who would connect the wearer of the clothes I have provided with the fashionable young lady, who may, perchance, be missing from her home in Grosvenor Street? No one. I repeat, no one. With regard to Mrs. Vanderstein we are even more entirely beyond suspicion. In the first place nobody will even enter this house for some weeks at least. When they do so it is unlikely that the flower stand will be touched. Though the plants will be renewed there will be no occasion, as far as I can see, to disturb the soil to a regrettable depth. But admitting that luck may go against us and the body be discovered, it will not be identified. I cut off the initials that were embroidered on her chemise, and the rest of the clothing I will take home with me now, and burn before I start on my journey. And I have a still better idea for diverting any suspicion from us. Listen to this."

And she expounded to Bert a plan, which made him open his eyes in unwilling admiration of the coolness and courage of the woman. Such a course as she

proposed to adopt would have been entirely beyond his powers, and well he knew it; indeed at first sight it seemed to require an almost inhuman audacity to carry it out successfully. Her intention was to go to a large hotel at some French watering place, Boulogne or Dieppe for choice, and there to pass herself off as Mrs. Vanderstein for a day or two, not long enough for the Jewess' friends to discover that she was there, but long enough to allow no doubt to exist of her having really been there when the fact should subsequently come to be known.

"I shall be far away by the time inquiries begin to reach to the other side of the channel," she told Bert, "and the proprietor of the hotel will answer all questions to our satisfaction. I shall so contrive that it is not I who write my name in the visitors' book. The manager will be so obliging as to do it for me when he hears that I have slightly injured my finger. But I shall not be feeling very well, I shall need repose after the journey. I think, yes, I think that I shall send for the doctor. When he is gone I shall give out that he has told me to keep to my room for a few days, and I shall therefore remain upstairs during the whole of my visit. When I leave I shall have established beyond doubt that the lady I impersonate was staying in the hotel when she was being sought in London, and after that she will be looked for abroad. Once the police have got the idea fixed in their stupid heads that Mrs. Vanderstein has left England, they may dig up her body as soon as they like, and I, for one, shall not feel a moment's anxiety."

"But," objected the startled Bert, "the people at the hotel will describe you, and that will be a give away."

"They will describe me," said Madame Querterot airily, "or they will describe Mrs. Vanderstein. It

will be the same thing. We are much alike, she and I. That is," she added hastily, "we were much alike. In the matter of the colour of my hair, it is true, I must make a great sacrifice. But I have resolved to forget the value that not I alone have always attached to the golden hue of my *chevelure*, and to dye it black this same morning, before I start on my travels. You see that I shrink at nothing! I promise you that, with a dress such as the Vanderstein would have worn and a trifling alteration in my colouring, you yourself would have doubts as to who I am. There will be no risk to speak of, though it is worth a little to cover my retreat by a stratagem so masterly."

With Bert's aid the clothes belonging to the two ladies were folded and made into a tidy parcel, then with a few more words of advice, and a special recommendation never to come into the house without the precaution of wearing gloves—for she was deeply impressed with the dangers attendant on careless finger-prints—Madame Querterot said a hasty farewell, the early summer dawn being at hand, and in another moment the back door of the house had shut behind her vanishing figure.

Bert, left alone without the support of the woman's ready resource and calm confidence, would have soon sunk again into despair if his time had not been too much occupied to admit of reflection. He was by now, besides, so tired and exhausted with the emotions he had undergone as to be incapable of coherent thought, and he was more than content to give his whole mind to carrying out the instructions he had received.

His first business was to get a brush from the cupboard under the stairs and to sweep and brush the floor of the hall, and the carpets of the stairs and drawing-room. He was awkward at the work, but made up

in thoroughness what he lacked in skill. Little shining pieces of paste off Mrs. Vanderstein's dress were scattered everywhere ; he swept up quantities of them, but still some, better concealed than others, escaped his diligence.

Then having set straight such of the furniture as had been moved or disarranged, he quietly opened the dining-room shutters and those of the back drawing-room, for he did not wish the place to look uninhabited. The shutters of the front drawing-room, however, he could not bring himself to touch, though he seemed to hear the words of scorn which Madame Querterot would have used if she had still been present. He listened at the door of the library for some time, but not a sound came from within ; at last, seeing no more to do, he stole quietly out of the house and back to his lodgings, where, in spite of the fears that pursued him and the dreadful memory of the night's work, he soon slept the sleep of exhaustion.

Not for long, however. In a couple of hours his alarm clock awakened him, and he started up to face the new terrors which the day would bring. He had to feed the dun horse, he remembered ; it would not do to annoy Ned.

After that came breakfast, for which he was surprised to find he had a certain appetite, and soon it was time to begin his daily routine at Ennidge and Pring's office.

Every time the door opened that day, and on the days that succeeded it, Bert expected to see a policeman enter. But the evening came without any such nightmare materialising, and he even managed to snatch some more uneasy slumber during the evening, before he once more assumed his disguising beard and stealthily returned to the house in Scholefield Avenue, knowing that before him lay far the worst part of the

whole business. He was too frightened for his own safety, however, to hesitate.

Madame Querterot had counted on that when she mentally balanced his regard for his own neck against what she would have designated his milksoppy squeamishness. It was hard to stay in that house of death alone and in the dark, waiting till the small hours, when his project might be best entered upon.

Bert was very, very sorry for himself as he sat, trembling violently, in an arm-chair in the dining-room. His pity did not extend to the other side of the partition wall, where the girl whose life he was about to take had sat in the same darkness and solitude for the last twenty-four hours. For her, Bert, thoroughly selfish by nature and education—as, cowering among the shadows in the grim company of his fears, he shuddered away the hours—was shaken from start to finish by no disabling pang of sympathy. Though at times his heart was like to burst with compassion, it held barely enough to meet the urgent need of Albert Tremmels; and when like her he heard the far-off murmurs which heralded the approaching storm and the angry boom of the thunder began to rumble closer and closer, though he started at each clap as if it were indeed the wrathful voice of the Avenger drawing near to him, his whole being cried out in resentful protest against this judgment that was being passed on him in the heavens, and against the certainty that it would be endorsed by mankind.

His intention was to wait till two o'clock, but it was not yet half-past one when he got to his feet, unable to face his solitary vigil any longer. Better get it over, he said to himself, like a patient in a dentist's room who has got to have a tooth out. Only this tooth was not his. He had long since decided that the spade would be the best thing to ensure the sinking of his

victim, and he had placed it, with a piece of cord tied to it, ready by the door.

Weighted with that heavy piece of iron, so he comforted himself, there would be a single splash and all would be over. He would be spared the sight of a struggling figure rising to the surface, perhaps crying to him for help or mercy, which above all things was what he most dreaded.

Fortifying himself with a mental vision, in which Julie, the hangman, and the body in the flower stand upstairs were all mingled, he unlocked the library door and pushed it open.

It is not necessary to tell again of his walk with Barbara through the drenching rain and clamour of the storm, which was more severe and prolonged than any of those that burst over London during a year remarkable for the number and fierceness of its atmospheric disturbances. The horror with which, at the last moment, as he was trying to tie the spade to Barbara before pushing her into the water, he beheld the running figure of the advancing policeman need not be described. In a frenzy of disappointment, rage and fear, he lifted the spade and struck at the girl again and again, missing her the first time, and, as the handle twisted in his weak grasp, bringing it down flat on the top of her head at the second blow, instead of edgeways as he was trying to do. He did not stay to see the result, but throwing down the spade fled for dear life.

His legs were long, and he could run fast for a short distance. In a few minutes he had lost himself and his pursuer in the darkness, but he still ran blindly on, till his utmost efforts would drag him no further, when he threw himself at full length on one of the park seats and endeavoured to still his panting, laboured breath. If the policeman should come upon him now, he thought

his only chance lay in being able to simulate profound slumber. Luckily the working powers of this plan were not put to the test. Minutes passed, and no one came near him. It was some time before he could convince himself that he had eluded all pursuit for the present. When he was at last sure of it the fact heartened him wonderfully. If he could so easily escape when caught in the actual perpetration of a violent attack, it would bother the authorities indeed to fasten on him as one of those concerned in a crime so well concealed as that in which he had only unwillingly assisted.

It was when he remembered that he was quite ignorant of the damage he had inflicted on Barbara that doubts assailed him again. It seemed to him that he must have killed her. But if not . . . if not? Why then, even though she could hardly denounce him, she would not forget Madame Querterot. And Madame Querterot's first line of defence would be to accuse him, as she herself had declared.

Curse the woman, how he hated her! From first to last everything was her doing; he wished, oh, how he wished that it was she he had killed. If he had thought of that sooner, he told himself savagely, all these troubles would have been saved. As things were he would probably be arrested that day.

He did not lose his head, however, and went back presently to Scholefield Avenue, where he cleared away the broken glass in the library and put everything in that room to rights, as he had already done upstairs. Then he conquered his repugnance and went out on to the balcony with his brush, and swept up a handful or so of earth, which they had not been able to remove with the spade.

He did not know how to get rid of the broken glass, as by now it was daylight and he did not dare go out

to bury it in the garden ; so he left it in the dustpan, and swept the grains of soil into an old newspaper, which he crumpled up and thrust into the back of the cupboard in the basement. Then he closed the shutters again, for he could not bear to be a moment in the room without the friendly screen that interposed between him and the flower stand. Finding, however, no more to do upstairs, he went down, and knocked out the pieces of the window pane in the library that still remained stuck in the frame ; he thought that the empty space might well pass unobserved for a considerable time. In doing this he cut his hand, through the glove he was wearing in obedience to Madame Querterot's reiterated commands, and some drops of blood fell on to the shining tin of the dustpan, but he wiped them off carefully and polished the pan with his sleeve as it had certainly never been polished since it left the shop and entered into domestic service.

At last his anxious mind could suggest nothing further, and he surveyed the results of his efforts with some complacency.

"I'm bothered," said Bert to himself, "if the brainiest detective on this rotten earth could set his fingers on a clue now."

CHAPTER XXVII

THERE was no sleep for him that morning, and he felt wretchedly ill and exhausted when the time came to go to the office. Mr. Ennidge, always kind, remarked sympathetically upon his looks, and he replied that he had been kept awake all night by the storm. The day passed without the expected appearance of the policeman, though he saw in the papers the first allusion to the disappearance of Mrs. Vanderstein and Miss Turner, and felt a horrified sinking at the heart when he read that search was being made, even though he had of course known all along that there must be a hue and cry.

He could not find any reference to his exploit in Regent's Park, and he was afraid this meant that the girl had survived, for if he had killed her surely there would have been some mention of it. Yet if she were alive it was strange that Miss Turner should still be thought to be missing. Perhaps it was a dodge of the police to fill him with false confidence. He could not guess what it meant, anyhow, and at all events he was thankful for one thing: that he had cleared up and finished with Scholefield Avenue. If they thought they would catch him there again they were jolly well wrong. He would never set foot in the place again, so help him!

He supposed that his confederate had got clear away, and after his work was over he went to see Julie, to make sure that everything had gone well.

He found her in despair at her mother's departure, or, rather, at the manner of it ; and it was with the utmost horror and indignation that he learned that Julie—as she afterwards admitted to Gimblet—had been left absolutely penniless. All his savings had been willingly given to Madame Querterot to help her flight, but he had things which could be pawned, and he pressed Julie to accept his assistance. This she would not do.

Then she showed him the string of pearls, and he recognised it at once as the necklace Mrs. Vanderstein had worn. He had seen since, in the newspapers, that these enormous pearls were well known to every jeweller in Europe, and there had not been wanting forecasts to the effect that, if they had been stolen, an attempt to sell them would lead to the arrest of the thieves. He had wondered if Madame Querterot knew this, and reassured himself by thinking that, if she did not, the friends she was to consult certainly would. But now, with passionate resentment, he realised that she had known it very well and had left the necklace to Julie, careless of the suspicion that might fall on her daughter if she should be tempted to try and sell it. Nay, it seemed even possible that she deliberately wished to cast suspicion upon Julie ; her action was otherwise unaccountable. But was it possible that she would risk not only his safety but her own, in order to gratify her spite against her daughter ?

Before he had fully grasped the meaning of this last manœuvre on the part of the woman he hoped to call his mother-in-law, Julie was telling him of the clothes her mother had given her, and which she had already sold to a second-hand dealer. In hoarse tones he demanded a description of the garments, and, when he had received it, burst forth into such raging comments on the girl's folly in selling them, and such furious

imprecations at the wickedness and stupidity of her mother, that Julie took offence, and in a fit of anger as hot as his own, though less justly provoked, told him to leave the house.

He was all penitence in a moment, and she ended by accepting his grovelling apologies. All the same, the fire of his wrath was not extinguished, but smouldered with a dull red heat in his heart, ready at any moment to leap into a fierce flame, burning to consume and devour.

When the night came he could not sleep, in spite, or perhaps because, of his extreme fatigue and harassed nerves. Not till daylight did he drop at last into an uneasy slumber, from which a nightmare sent him leaping up in bed, disturbing the house with his cries. His irate landlady appeared in his room, in extreme deshabille, and her scathing references to delirium tremens gave him the idea of the brandy bottle. He bought one at the nearest public-house the moment he was dressed, and drank a good wineglassful before he opened the daily paper that he procured at the same time.

There was nothing new in it, however. Though it contained plenty of allusions to the missing ladies there was nothing about a girl being knocked on the head in Regent's Park; and to Bert's fears this silence appeared ominous as a denunciation. He found the brandy very comforting, and took it to the office with him. There his appearance—rendered still more ghastly by want of sleep than it had been on the preceding days—moved Mr. Ennidge to such genuine concern that, Mr. Pring being away and not returning till Monday, he told Bert he had better take a holiday on the next day, which would be Friday.

In the afternoon he was beginning to feel a little better and to hope that after all things were going

right for him somehow, when at the eleventh hour Mr. Gimblet made his appearance upon the scene. From the moment when Bert understood who he was and what was his business, he gave himself up for lost. Some unsuspected gleam of courage came to his aid now, however—a sort of phantom of the real thing, found, it may be imagined, in the brandy bottle—and he made up his mind that, if he must be taken, it should not be due, at all events, to any revelation of his own.

The agony of mind endured during the hours which followed is not to be described in mere words. The dread, the suspense, the feeling of physical weakness which nearly overcame him as he witnessed the detective's search, and the final horrible moment when he saw the body of the poor lady drawn from the grave where he had thought it hidden for ever from his own, if not from every other eye, would have strained the nerve of any man. It was, indeed, a heaping of horror upon horror.

What unthinkable clairvoyance, what supernatural omniscience had led Gimblet to pick out that house, of all the dwellings in the great city and its suburbs, for his investigations, was as much beyond Bert's imagination as the means by which he himself succeeded in refraining from revealing, then and there, the part he had taken in the ghastly business.

To his almost incredulous astonishment no one seemed to suspect him, and instead of being removed in irons, as he expected, he found himself free to return to his lodgings, there to recuperate from the shocks he had sustained, in a deep, brandy induced sleep.

The next morning he was out early, and the first poster gave him the news that Mrs. Vanderstein was found, and staying at Boulogne. He bought the paper, and, even as he read the paragraph in which the news

was related, made up his mind to spend the holiday given him by Mr. Ennidge in running over to Boulogne to see Madame Querterot. He had no definite idea in doing so. But his rage at her treatment of her daughter was still red-hot, and now was added to it a furious resentment at her departure from the conduct they had agreed she should observe. What possessed her not to stay quietly in her room? It was madness to have gone out; yes, actually to have gone to the Casino, the place of all others where she was most likely to be seen by some acquaintances of Mrs. Vanderstein's. Did she want to lose them all by her folly and recklessness?

And in any case he could not rest till he had told her what he thought of her.

He went out to a pawnbroker's, and by pawning his watch and some odds and ends of jewellery that had belonged to his mother collected enough money for the return journey. Then he took a taxi for the first time in his life, and drove to Whitehall. He had seen Gimblet's address on the card he sent in to Mr. Ennidge.

Higgs told him, in answer to his inquiries, that the inquest would not be till the next day, so that there was nothing to prevent him from taking the ten o'clock train from Charing Cross. There was time before it started to put on his false beard, in an empty waiting-room, and to gulp down a strong dose of brandy at the bar of the refreshment-room. He felt safer when he had taken these precautions, for he had been haunted by an uneasy feeling that Higgs might have followed him from the flat.

The journey was uneventful, the sea as smooth as a pond. He hardly knew how the time passed before they arrived at Boulogne pier.

He walked round the harbour, asking the way by the

simple repetition of the words "Hôtel de Douvres," and following the direction in which the fingers of those who answered him were pointed.

Soon he came upon the hotel on the Digue, facing the sea. The name in golden letters a yard long danced before his eyes, but with a great effort of the will he steadied himself, and passed through the door into the hall.

As luck would have it there was no one about, and the only person to come forward at his entrance was a small page or lift boy.

Yes, Madame Vanderstein was in her room. Would Monsieur go up?

Certainly Monsieur would; and he was ushered into the lift and carried aloft.

He heard Madame Querterot's voice say "Come in" in response to the boy's knock, and in another minute he was in the room, with the door closing behind him.

For a moment he thought there must be some mistake, and, if she had not spoken, would have turned and fled. Surely he had never seen before the beautifully dressed, dark-haired lady who was bending over a box at the end of the room.

But at the sound of her voice he knew her again, though the difference in her appearance caused by her dyed hair and painted complexion was truly marvellous. She wore her elaborate dress with quiet assurance, and jewels sparkled at her throat, in her ears, on her fingers, her wrists.

"What in the world are you doing here?" she said, in a tone of the deepest disapproval.

Bert's voice shook as he took the paper from his pocket and held it out to her.

"Have you seen this?" he asked. "Every one in London knows you are here. It is madness to stay."

"Of course I have seen it," she answered coolly.

"And of course I shall not stay. I do but finish my packing. In ten minutes I shall ring to have my luggage taken downstairs. There is a train in half an hour."

"You will never escape now," he said gloomily. "Do you know, too, that they have found the body of Mrs. Vanderstein?"

This time she was startled.

"What do you say?" she cried. "What *bêtise* is this?"

"It is true," he said. "They found it last night. I was there."

"You were there? Last night?" she repeated. "And you were not arrested, not suspected? Why, then, our star is indeed guarding us."

"No, I wasn't arrested," he said, watching her, "and Joolie hasn't been arrested yet, either."

She started, and for a moment her eyes shone with the hatred and spite she cherished for her daughter. Then they fell before his. "Julie," she said; "why should Julie be arrested?"

"Don't you know?" he asked. "How is she to account for the pearls, and for the dresses and opera cloaks?"

"Oh, the dresses. Hasn't she burnt them? I told her to. If she has not she must do so at once."

"And the pearls—was she to burn them too?" said Bert quietly.

"They looked so well round her neck, the dear child. I left them as my wedding gift to you both."

"You left them because you knew you couldn't get rid of them. My God! I believe you meant to keep the whole lot for yourself. But the pearls were too dangerous, so you gave them to Joolie! You must have meant suspicion to fall upon her!"

"My dear Bert, you are absurd. Come and help

me to fasten this portmanteau. I shall register the luggage to Paris, and leave the train myself at Amiens. From there I can go off in another direction, and you will never hear of me again."

"Nor of the jewels either, no doubt."

"Oh, don't be afraid, you shall have the money for the jewels!"

Madame Querterot began to go on with her packing, which for the moment she had abandoned. As she bent over the trunk, filling up corners with crumpled newspapers, she hummed a merry little tune, and the implied disregard of his reproaches exasperated Bert beyond endurance. He stood quite still, making a violent effort at self-control, and looking about him in an unconscious attempt to regain his balance by a concentration of his attention upon some everyday object.

The fresh breeze off the water was fluttering the white muslin blinds by the open window and, as Bert passed his tongue over his parched lips, he tasted the salt taste of the sea. The tide was up, and the room full of the noise of the breaking waves, so that the rattle of a cart passing on the road beneath was merged and lost in the continuous volume of sound.

On the table were several outspread pieces of blue paper, and he read the typed messages from where he stood. They were the telegrams which Sir Gregory, Gimblet, and Sidney had dispatched that morning to Mrs. Vanderstein.

"Have you answered those?" he said, pointing to them.

"I answered Mr. Sidney's, and I sent one to the servants in Grosvenor Street," Madame Querterot broke off her tune to reply.

"I don't know who Aberhyn Jones is," she added, "nor where he lives, so I can't answer him;

and I haven't quite decided what to say to the detective."

She went on packing, and resumed her humming. Bert did not speak for a minute, then he said very quietly:

"I took the girl to Regent's Park, to the very edge of the water; and then a policeman came up and prevented me doing as we arranged."

"What!" Madame Querterot almost screamed.

She stood erect and gazed at Bert in incredulous dismay.

"I hit her and ran," he went on. "I don't suppose I did her much damage or I should have seen it mentioned in the papers, and there has been nothing about it."

"If she is alive I don't understand how it is they still believe Mrs. Vanderstein is here. But never mind that now. The point is, the girl, if she lives, will put them on my track. I shall not be able to escape now so easily. Perhaps the best thing to do is to go back and face it out. Better get my story in before they have time to puzzle out the truth."

She spoke musingly, more to herself than to her companion.

"Your story!" Bert repeated, speaking only a little above a whisper. His voice would not come out somehow; he felt as if he were choking. "You mean you will say that I did it! Why not say that you have been hiding from me in fear of your own life, all these days? That would round it off well!"

"Not a bad suggestion, Bert," she said. "I must look after myself, you know. It would be a pity, wouldn't it, for people to say that Julie's mother was hanged?"

She spoke with a sneer. She had not forgotten that Bert had used those words to her, nor forgiven him. She

was not afraid to let him see that his guess at her intentions was a good one; she felt for him a contempt too complete and profound to dread anything he might say or do.

It is a common failing among clever rascals to despise their dupes, but they often learn to their cost that danger may come from the most unlikely quarter.

The derisive note in her voice was the last straw on Bert's frayed nerves. His rage took hold of him so that he no longer knew what he was about; he became a tool in other hands than Madame Querterot's.

"Oh you fiend, you fiend!" he cried, and his voice was high and cracked, "hanging would be too good for a devil like you! You needn't be afraid, people never shall say that of Joolie's mother. You would have let her be hanged, you devil! Her and me, both of us. Oh—oh——"

The air was full of the murmur of the sea. It mingled with a maddening noise that buzzed in his ears and made thought impossible. A mist gathered before his eyes—a dreadful red mist in which everything swam and danced.

He bounded upon the woman, holding his hands outstretched before his face as though to fend off something unspeakably hideous and terrifying. Then they closed upon her throat and, with a sob, he shook her to and fro as a dog shakes a rat that has bitten it badly.

At last his rage spent itself. As it passed he became conscious of what he was doing, and with an exclamation of disgust loosened his grip.

She fell backwards, with a crash, across the open lid of the box she had been packing. The hinges snapped under the impact and the lid broke off and dropped to the floor with her. There she lay, head downwards, in an untidy heap, one arm twisted at a curious angle under her body.

Bert never doubted that she was dead, and he felt a glow of satisfaction stealing over him at the knowledge. There were great livid marks on her neck where his convulsive fingers had clutched at it, and he stooped over her and looked at them with a gratified smile. They were already turning black.

A slight noise in the next room brought him to his senses.

He crept on tiptoe to the door and listened intently with his ear to it. The sounds in the next room continued, some one seemed to be opening and shutting drawers; but there was no movement in the passage, and after a moment he opened the door cautiously and went out.

No one was in sight, and as an afterthought he went back, and removing the key locked the door on the outside, as silently as he had opened it. Then putting the key in his pocket he ran down the stairs. The page who had shown him up was idling in the hall, but no one else was about, though he caught a glimpse of a seated figure in the bureau as he passed. Forcing himself to pause as he passed the page, he said to him:

"Mrs. Vanderstein has asked me to tell you that she has a headache, and does not wish to be disturbed again to-day. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I will give the message at the bureau. They will tell the waiter and chambermaid."

The page spoke English perfectly, and Bert felt assured that he would do his errand. To make sure, he repeated his injunction and gave the boy a shilling to impress it on his memory. Then he walked down the steps with every outward appearance of calm.

His impulse was to go back towards the harbour, but as a precaution he started off in the opposite direction and only approached the docks after several turnings separated him from the sea-front. There

was no boat back to England, however, till past seven, and he hung about the port for three whole hours that seemed like three centuries. In a quiet corner behind some empty trucks he got rid of his black beard, and applying a match to it saw it frizzle up and disappear in two or three seconds. He ground the ashes into the earth with his heel, and with a recklessness which surprised himself walked back past the doorway of the Hôtel de Douvres, to see if he would be known. The page was still lolling in the doorway, and, to Bert's satisfaction, stared at him as he passed with a vacant eye. He felt certain he had not been recognised, and went back to the harbour with a lighter heart.

There he watched the steamer from Folkestone arrive and disembark her passengers, among whom—though he did not know it—was the man sent by the London police to interview Mrs. Vanderstein ; and a few minutes later it was time to go on board the boat, which took him back to England.

The next morning found him back in his place at the house agents' office, and as the day passed without event he began to feel a sense of security to which he had lately been a stranger. After all, he had passed hours in the company of London's greatest detective without arousing any suspicion ; and every hour, he believed, added to his safety.

He was comparatively cheerful when he went down to Pimlico that evening to see Julie.

But he found her in a harder mood than usual ; and when, with exceeding want of discretion, he chose that most unpropitious moment to urge his suit, she told him very plainly that she would never consent to be his wife.

She had no intention of marrying, she said ; she was going to enter the convent as she had always wished.

But, she added, with unnecessary cruelty—for she was still angry with him for his behaviour a day or two before—in no case would she have married him. She did not reciprocate his feelings, and she considered that he and she were quite unsuited to each other; he had much better never think of her again.

Thus it happened that he went away in the blackest depths of misery and despair, so that when the police rapped at his door an hour later they found a man broken and unstrung to such a point as to hail their coming with something like relief.

Such was the gist of Albert Tremmels' story; and, as it never varied in the smallest detail in the course of its many repetitions, it may be imagined that it was true in substance.

Whether this would have been the opinion expressed by a jury cannot now be known, for Bert died in prison while awaiting his trial. His constitution, always frail, had not been able to withstand the bodily fatigues, and more especially those torments of the mind which he had endured during that week of stress, and a latent tendency to disease was not slow to take advantage of his weakened condition. Its rapid development was perhaps due, in part, to the fact that he made little effort to get well, and seemed to have no wish to live. What, indeed, as he said, had he to live for?

He showed no repentance for his attack on Miss Turner, beyond saying that it would have been unnecessary if he had had the sense to kill Madame Querterot first, but he maintained with his last breath that the idea was not his, any more than the thought of murdering Mrs. Vanderstein, which he persisted in affirming had never crossed his mind. He gloried in the death of his confederate, however, nor could all the efforts of the prison chaplain move him to a better frame of mind with regard to his deed. On the contrary, he

did not cease to gloat over the remembrance of it. Not even when he heard that Julie piously refused him her forgiveness, in spite of her mother's designs upon herself, would Bert admit that he regretted that which he had done. It is a cynical freak of circumstance that his love for the girl, which was pure and unselfish and the only creditable part of his whole nature, should from first to last have been the inspiring source from which his crimes proceeded.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IT was a few days before Joe Sidney was allowed to see Barbara. The news of her friend's death had been broken to her by the doctor, and though her grief was profound she bore the shock better than they had feared likely, and continued to make good progress towards recovery.

It was on the day following that on which she learnt the truth, or rather a bowdlerised version of it, that Sidney refused to be longer denied, and practically forced his way into the private room at the hospital to which she had been moved.

At sight of her sad, tear-stained face, framed in bandages, and wearing such a different aspect from when he had last looked on it, the little speech he had prepared to greet her with died on his lips, and he could only take her hand in silence and gaze at her without a word till the door had shut behind the nurse, who, dearly as she would have liked to remain, was luckily prevented from doing so by an urgent summons to attend on the house surgeon elsewhere.

"Oh, my dear, I thought you were dead," he stammered.

She was very weak still, and while the tenderness in his voice, still more than the words themselves, brought a feeble little smile of the purest content to play a moment round the corners of her mouth, they also caused the blood to rush to her face in a hot, embarrassing wave, so that she turned her head away,

and lay facing the wall with no conscious wish except to hide from him.

Then the flush died away, leaving her very white and still and silent, with eyes tightly shut. She knew that if she opened them or tried to speak she would not be able to help crying.

Sidney did not understand her stillness. A dreadful fear came upon him that she had fainted, and he looked round for the bell. It was just out of reach; but, when he tried to withdraw the hand which still held hers, her clasp gently tightened on it, and would not let him go.

With a muffled exclamation he fell on his knees beside the pillow.

"Barbara, Barbara," he cried, "will you always go hand in hand with me now?"

And with face still averted she murmured: "Always, always!"

It was half an hour later that he asked her about the unsigned telegram she had sent him. What had she meant by saying good luck was coming his way?

She reluctantly confessed her determination to provide him with the money he needed.

"Of course I always knew you were clever and dear enough to manage even that," he said. "That's why I didn't bother unnecessarily over the mess I'd got into."

"Oh," cried Barbara, "how dare you say that! Why, you were desperate; I was terrified by the things you hinted at."

"It was disgraceful of me to talk in that way," he admitted, ashamed. "But you haven't told me how you intended to provide me with money. As if I'd have taken it from you! I didn't know you were a millionaire."

"You know Mr. Vanderstein left me £30,000, which

I was to have if poor Mrs. Vanderstein died? I shall get it now, I suppose," said Barbara, her eyes filling with tears.

Joe stroked her hand in silent sympathy, and with a quaver in her voice she went on.

"Well, I meant to borrow £10,000 on the strength of my prospects, and place it anonymously to your credit at Cox's. So you see you would have had to take it!" she concluded triumphantly. "You wouldn't have known who it was from."

"I should have known perfectly well," he said. "Who else could good luck come to me from if not from you? I knew you sent the telegram, you see."

"You couldn't have proved it, and you'd have had to take the money, because there would have been no one to send it back to."

"It was like you to think of it," Joe said, "but I don't believe you could have raised the money anyhow. Aunt Ruth's life was nearly as good as yours then, and you hadn't really any security to offer, you silly darling."

Barbara's face fell. "I didn't think of that, but surely I could have got £10,000 when I would have offered £30,000 in exchange," she said sadly. "But it doesn't matter now, does it?"

He hastened to reassure and comfort her.

"And you will never bet again?" she asked presently.

"I have sworn that I never will," Joe answered. "I've had a lesson more severe than even I needed, I think."

"If ever you want to have a teeny tiny bet," she smiled, "I can do it for you, perhaps, if you're good."

"No, no," he said seriously, "you must give it up too. I shall want you to help me to stick to my resolutions. Promise!"

"Very well," she said, seeing how grave he looked; "I promise faithfully never to gamble again in any way, as long as I live."

"Now we are safe!" he cried. "Indeed, I have used up all the luck one man can scrape together in a lifetime in winning you, and I shall think of that, if I am ever again tempted to stake anything on the chance of further kindness at the hands of Fortune."

"Don't be foolish," Barbara urged; "there is heaps and heaps more luck in store for you."

And so, in their serene confidence of the happy future which awaits them, we will leave these two young people, who, if any more dangers lie unsuspected in the path down which they are to travel through the years, will brave them no longer in solitary isolation, but strengthened and reinforced by an enduring love.

THE END

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